

[The inside story of how
World Vision responded to
the **tsunami** disaster.]

“WE’VE GOT AN

EMERGENCY!”

Essential Lessons Every Manager Needs to Learn Before a Crisis Hits

By Mark Cutshall

In the time it takes you to say his title—strategy director of Emergency Response and Disaster Mitigation (ERDM) for World Vision—Randy Strash seized the magnitude of the message his colleague Jules Frost relayed to him on the phone from her office in Washington D.C. that fateful morning of Sunday, December 26, 2004:

“There’s been a major earthquake, followed by a tsunami in India and Indonesia. We’re going to have to activate the ERDM action team.”

His reaction was automatic. Immediately, he started making phone calls. Following a carefully-scripted emergency response plan developed over the previous two-and-a-half years, 15 members of the ERDM leadership team huddled around a conference table at World Vision’s headquarters in Federal Way, Wash.

Their defined roles and collaborative efforts that afternoon accelerated World Vision’s relief operations, engaging the news media and inspiring unprecedented financial support that ultimately saved lives and reduced suffering along thousands of miles of devastated coastline in five countries of South Asia. The organization has nearly 4,000 staff based permanently in the nations affected.

What Randy and others on the ERDM team learned in the first 48 hours, along with the subsequent “20/20 hindsight” wisdom they acquired, provide essential management lessons to leaders and managers who want to avoid unnecessary stress, financial drain and operational turmoil that come when that inevitable emergency hits, be it a broken gas line, power outage or security breach.

Invaluable Real-Time Lessons

“The first and most important thing we learned is that the quality of your emergency response is determined by how proactive you are in preparing for such an event,” says Strash.

Jayanth Vincent, director of media relations for World Vision in India, exemplified that proactive stance of the organization’s 22,000 employees, filing early news alerts that were posted on World Vision’s website within hours of the tsunami’s fury. Such on-site dispatches regularly updated ERDM’s critical functions, including media relations, fundraising and relief operations, and

helped World Vision give its constituents early reliable news of the disaster, relief needs and the organization’s unfolding response.

An email blast the following day, with key facts about the disaster, stimulated hundreds of thousands of supporters and friends to visit World Vision’s website and make online donations.

“The timing of our email blast resulted in donations of about \$21 million that first week or so,” reports Strash, who adds that World Vision’s Internet presence enabled people to forward the news to friends around the country, a testimony to the power of viral marketing. (The overwhelming response generated a set of real-time lessons and on-the-job learning opportunities to sustain critical momentum—see sidebar on page 8.)

The organization’s emergency response plan reached to the highest level. World Vision President Richard Stearns organized meetings with all senior vice presidents and directors to make sure decisions and actions of the ERDM team bridged to the highest level of leadership.

“World Vision’s greatest opportunity was to introduce this ministry to millions of Americans who might not have known the depth and breadth of our work,” says Stearns. “There were more



SEASURGE04 Following months of anticipation, nineteen new World Vision catamarans set off on their maiden voyage, captained by a lively band of local fishermen. Akaraigori village’s newest fiberglass fleet boldly set off into the Bay of Bengal, reviving hopes that once again fishing could be this community’s mainstay. The laughter and banter aboard each boat was salient evidence of just how vital this new program is to the fishermen’s psychological and economic recovery.

Photo: © 2005/World Vision India

than 60,000 first-time U.S. donors over the first few weeks following the tsunami, the greatest number of new supporters responding to a natural disaster since World Vision was established in 1950.”

While World Vision’s emergency response plan gave marching orders to each department, the plan may have actually given employees the freedom to go the extra mile. Within minutes after he learned about the tsunami, Rick Mitchell, in World Vision’s marketing department, purchased a slew of domain names, including “Asia tsunami,” that, once inside the workings of Google and other search engines, drove untold thousands of curious web visitors (including many unfamiliar with World Vision’s work) to the organization’s website.

“A second thing we learned,” Strash notes, “is that having an emergency plan allows you to quickly assess the size and scope of the disaster and direct your resources accordingly. In the first hours, it became clear this was what we call a Category III, the largest on our international scale, and that meant we would have access to our Emergency Preparedness and Response Fund for the initial response, expanding the budget later as the generosity of our donors allowed.

“A third lesson,” adds Strash, “is that when a crisis hits, especially a sudden-onset disaster with no prior warning, time is your enemy. In a crisis, you don’t have the luxury to develop and then activate appropriate multiple response options. That means thinking things out ahead of time. For instance, you need to have predetermined your preferred suppliers by geographic zone for standard relief equipment and supplies, and contacted them well in advance of any emergency to develop airtight ‘frame agreements.’

“For example, it means you need to have suppliers in strategic locations around the globe who agree to keep in stock at least 50,000 blankets in bales of predetermined size and weight, or to provide up to half a dozen 10-ton bush-worthy trucks at a specified price. Without such agreements, you can lose precious days in mounting your response. Also, considering we’re often competing with other organizations for the same goods and services, the prices

4 Management Lessons Learned by World Vision in the Wake of the Tsunami Disaster

THAT OPPORTUNISTIC APPROACH in the wake of the South Asia tsunami disaster enabled World Vision to learn some of its best emergency-driven lessons, including:

■ **Underestimating the appeal of the organization’s website during a major disaster event.** The normal capacity of 1,000 daily transactions was upgraded to 2,000 transactions a few weeks before the tsunami struck, in anticipation of the year-end peak of donation activity. However, on the Tuesday following the disaster the system had already handled 4,000 transactions before slowing to a crawl. *Solution:* Hire an outside website host that, on the third day after the tsunami, was able to process 14,000 donations each day.

■ **Underestimating the number of phone calls to one of its many toll-free numbers (1-888-56-CHILD).** *Solution:* Extending the hours of phone coverage and hiring extra help to handle phone-in donations, including outsourcing overflow calls during peak times; and redoubling efforts to ensure a professional approach by each World Vision phone representative, making updated Q&A scripts available online—modified by each day’s experience, and updated field reports.

■ **Underestimating the number of email messages from prospective donors, requiring immediate response.** In the first week alone, World Vision accumulated a backlog of 1,600 unanswered emails. *Solution:* Dividing queries into categories and developing standard reply templates for each category, which could be easily customized to the individual.

■ **Underestimating the sensitivity of automatic donation processing equipment to printing errors.** A fraction of an inch displacement of the “scan line” on some response devices resulted in a backlog of hundreds of thousands of unprocessed checks. *Solution:* Recalibrate the machinery as much as possible, running the checks through again; and offer double-overtime pay to the most reliable donation processing staff to handle the rest by hand.

can skyrocket as demand exceeds supply, all of which means reduced support to disaster victims.”

Essential to World Vision’s quick response in South Asia, Strash reports, is simulation exercises. Fortuitously, World Vision had held a major mock disaster exercise in Bangkok, Thailand in late November, just a month before the tsunami.

“A well-planned and executed mock disaster forces you deal with potential mistakes and gaps before they happen for real,” he says. “Numerous rehearsals drive home the need to constantly simplify your strategy and action steps. Your plan needs to address only the absolute essentials. There’s a temptation to spend too much time on too many details, planning for things that are never likely to happen. If you summarize your key action steps on pocket-sized, laminated cards and give staff regular practice in using them through simulation exercises, then they will be able to kick-start an effective response while most people are still in a state of total confusion.

“When an emergency happens,

human nature kicks in and most people knowingly ignore the master plan that’s sitting on the director’s bookshelf in a big binder collecting dust,” says Strash, who always carries a series of wallet-sized laminated cards with succinct instructions for key ERDM members. One of these cards reads: “5 ESSENTIAL STEPS during the first 24 hours following a disaster” (see sidebar).

48 Hours...Remarkable Results

In the first 48 hours, the protocols set in motion by ERDM generated remarkable results:

■ **Media Relations**—news reports on World Vision’s response with major news organizations, including CNN, all three television networks and news wires.

■ **Fundraising**—\$2.2 million raised on-line.

■ **Relief Operations**—supplies distributed to nearly 200,000 disaster survivors.

Strash believes these outcomes were possible because before the tsunami hit, two foundational supports were in place.

“One key pillar of our emergency

response plan was a culture of service—the commitment of our staff to rise to the occasion. A number of our people worked round the clock; during that first week, they ate, slept and showered in the office. They dropped their vacation plans without hesitation.” (Strash himself jettisoned a long-anticipated one-week vacation on that Sunday morning he activated the ERDM team.)

“If your organization’s leaders don’t make it a priority to come through in the clutch, your whole effort will slow to a halt. At World Vision, people wanted to roll their sleeves up. There wasn’t the attitude of ‘Oh, do I have to come in?’ Rather, it was, ‘This is what we’ve been trained to do.’

“A second pillar is having managers who will take calculated risks, even bend the rules if necessary. Shortly after the tsunami, a representative from Tully’s Coffee contacted someone in our marketing department and wanted to know if World Vision wanted to partner with their company in a cause-related fundraising promotion. Because time was of the essence, our person said, ‘yes,’ and provided the requested details without going through the normal chain of command. The campaign generated \$1 million in contributions.”

Other singular decisions made at the senior leadership level proved even more beneficial. To limit unforeseen operational costs, Larry Probus, senior vice president for strategic solutions, initiated a specialized budget, which tracked daily expenses and capped overhead at 15 percent, helping ensure increased impact of donations.

To date, U.S. donations alone total \$67.2 million—\$58.1 million in private gifts, \$1.6 million in government aid, \$7.5 million in gifts-in-kind. The \$350 million total in global contributions to World Vision’s tsunami response equals the relief aid committed by the U.S. government.

WORLD VISION Emergency Response and Disaster Mitigation (ERDM) team members carry a wallet-sized, laminated card—so they are prepared when disaster strikes, like the 2004 tsunami. Make a copy for your managers as a first step in preparing your response plan for the first 24 hours of a disaster that might affect you.

5 ESSENTIAL STEPS during the first 24 hours following a disaster

1. Activate the National Rapid Response Team

- Clarify as to who assumes leadership under the circumstances.
- Confirm RRT member availability.
- Specify roles and immediate action steps.

2. Send Initial Alert Communication

- Immediate telephone call to any one of the Regional Emergency Response team members, informing that person of the situation *even if details are lacking*; the regional team will inform the rest of the organization, as needed.
- A list of the office, home and mobile phone numbers of all key staff will be in the Relief Responders Toolbox.

3. Mobilize the Initial Evaluation Process

- Rapid assessment to determine what is known about the disaster’s impacts.
- Initial response plan to provide for the first week’s anticipated emergency needs.
- Photo and story resource gathering for posting to the World Vision website.

4. Activate Contacts with Donors and Partners

- Alert the primary ERDM contact and backups in each of the support offices (standard distribution).
- Contact the National Emergency Network.
- Provide updates to UN, ECHO, key embassies and inter-agency working group.

5. Mobilize Immediate Response to Affected World Vision Project Zones

- Use cash flow to cover immediate local purchase of relief supplies (no prior approval needed for redirection of up to 10 percent of annual budget).
- Contact program officer of associated support office if additional funds will be required (24 hour turnaround is standard).
- Initiate write-up of detailed plans by affected project zone.

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What difference is World Vision’s emergency/disaster response plan making today? Because of pre-positioning, World Vision is now able to respond anywhere to most major emergency situations, even where the organization has no existing programs.

What can an emergency/disaster plan mean for your organization? Perhaps there’s an even better question: Will that plan be at your fingertips (or lounging in the “To Do” file) when you get those inevitable words, “We’ve got an emergency!”?

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