

ARE YOU READY TO THINK FAST?

The Eskom debacle has sounded an alarm, highlighting the need for proactive crisis planning on the part of every single company and organisation in this country.

"In the face of the national electricity crisis, at no time has it been more important for the commercial sector to pay attention to crisis planning and to incorporate it into organisational strategy," says Evan Bloom, MD of Crisis Communications Consultancy.

Proactive crisis planning activities include forecasting potential crises and strategising how to deal with them. "Organisations must invest time and resources in completing a crisis management plan *before* they experience a crisis," says Bloom. "Planning is vital because a disaster can happen at any time. The electricity blackouts have made it patently clear that a crisis can affect your business even if it was not at all of your own making."

The single most important factor in successful crisis management is preparation, Bloom says. "What really counts is what you do before the crisis hits. Preparation minimises the effects and may even enable the business to avert the crisis altogether."

However, he notes, the vast majority of South African companies have no crisis plan in place. "The few that do generally have a static document that does not cover all the bases. They may have crisis management components in place, but they typically don't have a holistic approach to crises. Some focus on emergency response, while others concentrate on continuity or reputation. But these have to be integrated and the entire response must be guided."

The most fundamental mistake most organisations make when it comes to proper planning is thinking that they can pick up the phone and hand matters over to a consultant when adversity strikes. "By then it's just too late," says Bloom. "Without a comprehensive plan in place, your actions are reactive. The danger of knee jerk reactions is that the company ends up pulling in its entire senior team to deal with the situation, often placing the business itself at even greater risk. Best practice shows that a crisis team should be made up of a handful of people, all of whom are directly involved in addressing the issue, leaving a management team able to get on with the job of running the business."

Bloom refers to "the golden hour", the first 60 minutes after a crisis has struck. "That is when you have the best chance of addressing the matter at hand before rumour mongering takes over and negative reports begin to appear in the media."

Bloom says companies need to understand all components of a crisis plan. "It's an active, strategic document, not a check list. The way that a plan is formulated and shaped depends on two critical aspects: a vulnerability audit that comprises an enterprise-wide analysis of the organisation and how it operates; and scenario planning to identify all the situations and events the company may have to face.

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