

Knowledge for Disaster planning: lowering the risk, lowering the stress

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Abstract:

This presentation will be based on research over twenty years, and experience serving on the phone hotline for AIC CERT during the Super Storm Sandy disaster of 2012. The effect of that storm on artists, galleries as well as cultural institutions and individuals was severe. The AIC CERT hotline provided disaster support after the event. Training is required to serve on AIC CERT and includes FEMA online training to assist cultural responders in understanding terminology and tactics of first responders such as firemen.

Everyone has a disaster personality type and recognizing your type can be extremely helpful when dealing with disasters. Prior preparation can lower the risk of disasters, but also recognizing your disaster personality can help when an event occurs to assure your best results for recovery. Risk management is the means to assess risk, prepare with training, purchasing supplies and reviewing maintenance capability and scheduling improvements to lower risk of incidents. Being prepared helps to low the stress when an incident occurs and practice and knowledge lower the stress during response and recovery.

This presentation will cover 1) risk assessment surveys as well as 2) review disaster personality types to help participants better understand and so control their reactions in a disaster, as well as understand how to lower risk. Disasters happen and many cannot be prevented, but readiness and preparation can help to mitigate the damage from disasters, whether man-made or caused by natural hazards such as storms.

Keywords:

Disaster planning, disaster personality, risk management, risk assessment, mitigation

Risk management is a means to reduce risk, often called disaster risk reduction (DRR) and is defined by Wikipedia as “a systematic approach to identifying, assessing and reducing the risks of disaster. It aims to reduce socio-economic vulnerabilities to disaster as well as dealing with the environmental and other hazards that trigger them: it has been strongly

influenced by the mass of research on vulnerability that has appeared in print since the mid-1970s.^[1] It is the responsibility of development and relief agencies alike. It should be an integral part of the way such organizations do their work, not an add-on or one-off action. DRR is very wide-ranging: Its scope is much broader and deeper than conventional [emergency management](#). “

Disasters happen; large ones like the Florence flood of 1966, the earthquake near Christchurch New Zealand in 2010, or small disasters such as water leaks or pest problems. In the case of cultural institutions, risk reduction is part of disaster planning to evaluate the risk and to consider means to reduce the risk when possible. Planning for disasters is not something anyone wants to think about, but it is something that everyone should think about in order to take appropriate action. In this 50th anniversary year since the Florence flood it behooves cultural institutions to take stock of their own situation and consider how best to protect and preserve the collections for which they are stewards. The important initial step is getting upper administration support for taking appropriate action. A good next step is conducting an assessment of the institution's risk and considering what is possible to mitigate. Options to lower risk include elimination of the hazard, transfer to others, usually through insurance, reduce the hazard to within acceptable range and do nothing beyond recognizing the situation and preparing as best you can for an event.

Risk management prepares cultural institution staff by communication and planning and practice before a disaster. Key to avoiding and reducing risk is knowledge of risk and that is done by gathering information, otherwise known as survey assessment. Perhaps the easiest way to start an assessment is to consider the history of disasters in the institution. Have there been flooding, earthquakes, tornadoes, storms that caused water incidents? Sometimes there is only a leak when the wind blows rain in from a certain direction. Such infrequent and odd occurrences are difficult to remedy, but important to document. Are there areas where there are regular leaks? From a consideration of past disastrous events and the current state of the facilities one can evaluate the need for further mitigation of risk as well as incorporating that information into disaster planning. Documenting past events, even if years after the fact, can be useful in establishing a history of problem areas or of types of storms that have caused problems in the past. Asking staff who have worked at the institution to share their knowledge helps to establish that group culture that is one component of recovery. Pooling knowledge is a good way to both gain information and let the staff know that the administration wants their input in helping prevent future disasters. Documentation is important to have to capture information gained through interviews and walk throughs with staff.

Knowing the current state of the facilities is essential and that is best done in collaboration with facilities staff. Working together to correct problems in facilities is key to disaster mitigation, especially those small water incursions from leaking water pipes or drains that have not been cleaned to allow smooth passage of storm water.

Doing a regular walk through of the facilities with maintenance staff is a good way to identify areas of concern and working through the next steps to reduce risk. Regularly inspecting roof and drainage areas can avoid issues of roof leaks, and doing prevent maintenance for plumbing, gutters, grounds around facilities can alert maintenance to possible issues that can be corrected before they become hazardous. Testing fire detection and suppression on a regular basis can avoid a fire disaster. All of this takes time but involving the staff is part of increasing their knowledge and involvement in thinking about a possible disaster. By doing

so you create a “survival tradition” that involves the entire staff as well as the local first responders, such as police and fire departments.

Training of all staff in identifying hazards, in fire safety, in security and in personal safety is all part of preparing for all possible disaster scenarios. It also encourages staff to think about what they can do to protect the collections and themselves in an emergency situation. Many eyes can help identify long standing issues such as partially obstructed exits and stairwells. Long standing storage in little used spaces can create a hazard should that space be needed. Using Fire Marshall visits to improve the space is positive not only in developing relations with the Fire Department, but also in identifying what may be so familiar as to be unnoticed as a hazard. The administration of cultural institutions must support risk management and disaster planning and show their support so that the entire staff and community see the value of contributing to the planning and practice sessions.

Examples of risk assessment information including survey instruments that can be used as a guide in walking through a facility can be found at <http://eu-chic.eu/images/uploads/EU-CHIC%20SPLIT%20QUARANTA.pdf> International Conference on Cultural Heritage Preservation which also cites the CEN standard 346 for standardized condition survey language. ICCROM the International Centre for the Study of the Preservation and restoration of Cultural Property also has useful information. <http://www.preventionweb.net/experts/guest/collection/44401> more specifically toward fire, <http://www.fire.org.nz/Research/Published-Reports/Documents/aee9fac73cb67577b0c3e4b63011e8d5.pdf> helps institutions identify fire risks to heritage buildings from the New Zealand Fire Service Commission.

The above resources and many more that are available on the web can serve to mitigate hazards, to prepare for the disaster and to reduce the severity when the disaster occurs.

When the disaster hits and we know that is quite likely, then risk management solutions can take effect with a recovery team. The book *The Unthinkable: who survives when disaster strikes—and why* by Amanda Ripley (2008), is about disasters that take a heavy human toll, but it provides useful information for cultural institutions to consider.

“Just as individuals can be more or less resilient, so can groups. Groups perform as well during a disaster as they performed before it. The healthier an office culture or family, the better it can absorb stress and recovery. High-functioning groups know how to communicate and help one another, and they have the resources to do it.” (134)

Developing plans and involving all staff is key to recovery. Again I quote from “The Unthinkable”:

Rescorla (emergency manager for Morgan Stanley offices in the World Trade Center) used his military training. “His military training had taught him a simple rule of human nature, the core lesson of this book: the best way to get the brain to perform under extreme stress is to repeatedly run it through rehearsals beforehand. Or as the military puts it, the ‘eight P’s’: ‘Proper prior planning and preparation prevents piss-poor performance.’” (205-206) Training staff in disaster response will go a long way to reducing the crisis after the disaster. Knowing how to salvage water damaged materials, knowing how to clean smoke damaged materials for example, can help recovery and get the crisis under control.

Coop planning (**C**ontinuity of **o**peration) is another piece of risk management and disaster planning to know how the institution will again open the doors for the public. How will services be provided should a disaster require that a library close its door for a time? Cultural institutions rely on visitors and libraries rely on patrons to validate their existence with funding agencies. What would happen if the library had to close its door for a year during renovation after a disaster? Would the patron base find another library to provide the same services? That seems likely and in fact that is what normally happens. What should libraries do to plan for a temporary shutdown so that they can still provide services to their patrons? Could a Mutual Aid Agreement be made with other nearby libraries to agree to provide online access to resources? Would agree back up of ILS records as a shared partnership provide the needed restart should there be a loss of computing power? Would there be a storefront close by where they could provide limited services? Would there be insurance coverage for temporary expenses? Again this is about advance planning and consideration of the most likely scenarios. Insurance is meant to transfer the risk of loss to another party, the insurance company. The insurance company is hoping you won't have a disaster that will be covered by your insurance, but the administration must consider what insurance is necessary to get the services up and running again. Business interruption insurance is one way to quickly resolve the need for short term funding for temporary quarters or service costs. Property insurance will provide recovery of loss from fire or storm or a wide variety of disastrous events, but that will not quickly replace a building or its contents to reestablish services which are an important consideration for a library.

Planning and practicing response is an excellent way to prepare for disasters. One of my colleagues encourages her staff to assist in area disaster recovery for other libraries knowing that they are learning much about how best to recover their own collections should a water or fire event happen. She not only earns praise for contributing to the recovery of less fortunate institutions, she also provides hands on training for her staff. Small disasters like water leaks can be an excellent training tool and while no library wants damage to their collections when it happens the advantage is that staff learns more and more about recovery techniques and working together as a team. Four elements that are necessary are ability to evaluate situation, anticipate needs, delegate authority, maintain communications and deal with stress in self and others.

During this preparation you may or may not know you and your staffs' disaster personality: Who is a take charge, who is good at assessing the situation, who knows to ask for everyone's input? While you want a "take charge" person to direct the efforts, you also want someone who takes time to think through the consequences of action. Some personalities freeze in an unfamiliar situation, which is what a disaster scene most frequently is. Having the ability to stay calm, think and be positive are all necessary after a disaster, but also to start the process of recovery. Communication is again a key piece in recovery so identifying a person or persons who are able to give clear instructions, to communicate with the public about the results of the disaster and craft language to explain and project how the cultural institution will cope with the situation to once again become whole is important for the community as well as for the institution. Assigning tasks during a disaster recovery effort is an important position and might be called the "project" manager. A project being something with start and end and with clear goal. If someone on your staff has project training they might be ideal to manage the recovery effort. Sometimes it is the calm personality that is best in a crisis. Only you and your staff can determine the best fit for the needed tasks based on the skill set and personality of everyone.

The survival arc follows the same pattern as any understanding of a disaster with denial, deliberation, fear and groupthink and then hopefully decisive action. While Riley's investigation and discovery is based on disasters of greater human magnitude than what we could expect for a cultural institution or library, it is important to understand how an institution's disaster plan would fit into a larger scale disaster affecting a city, region or larger geographical area. Again the ability of the staff of a cultural institution to recover and help with the recovery of the community is an important aspect of disaster planning which goes beyond protecting collections, it becomes part of recovery for the community at large.

Knowing your "disaster" personality and that of others is important as you consider training and most important in assigning tasks for salvage and recovery. During the Super Storm Sandy recovery, I happened to have phone duty as a trainer member of the National Heritage Responders network organized through the AIC. I answered over 50 calls in the month immediately after the storm and $\frac{3}{4}$ of those in the first week. Artists and gallery owners were confused, frightened, feeling hopeless with 8 feet of water covering their art or their stock. What I was able to do was to calm them to provide information for who to call for salvage and to offer hope that they had not lost "their life's work" or the entire collection they were selling. Was I correct about this? In most cases I was, but more importantly my calm manner, my promise to answer the phone whenever they needed to talk, my support of their situation was what they needed to hear. I didn't answer all their questions, but I found them expert when that was what would best serve them. Most importantly I didn't deny their feelings, I didn't tell them it would be alright, but I did give them hope and provided them with ideas for recovery. I talked to some of the same people three and four times and they thanked me for being there to talk through their next steps, to offer them support. Sometimes that is the best help in a disaster, but remaining calm and focused is always a good place to be in a disaster situation. Don't panic, don't freeze, don't say you will think about it tomorrow, instead assess, consider options, ask advice, and then plan out next steps and proceed.

Years of assisting in disaster recovery helps, but being prepared, and practiced will lower your risk and your stress and do the same for those around you.

References

Ripley, Amanda, *The Unthinkable: Who survives when disaster strikes—and why*; Crown Publishers, NY, NY 2008.