

Forming Disaster Recovery and Emergency Response Teams: Communicating With Recovery Teams



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In the first two articles of this series, Leo Wrobel showed us how to set up disaster recovery teams and discussed how they interface in the recovery process. In this final installment, he adds the essential ingredient that pulls it all together: communications, or what the military calls "4C".

This month we'll cover the final essential ingredient in any successful recovery plan: the ability to mobilize and communicate with these teams through effective "First Alert" procedures. To state it another way, you can have the most elegant plan in the world, but that matters little if you cannot contact or coordinate the people who will be involved in it.

What Was That?

After a bang, crash, tremor, or loud thud, the phrase, "What was *that*?" naturally follows. My wife and I have raised seven children, so we use that phrase a lot in our household. Comic relief aside, it is literally the first thing anyone asks after an event: "What happened?" And immediately afterward, people want to know what that crash affected, if they were in danger, and whether they will be called to fix whatever went bang or bo. What people really are seeking at that moment is an *instant situational analysis* of what happened, what it affected, and how it might affect them. What comes more, the first thing they reach for 99 times out of 100 is the telephone.

"Houston, we've had a problem." — April 13, 1970, Astronaut Jim Lovell, Apollo 13

The famous phrase above is a dramatic example of the importance of communications. In a disaster, there is no substitute for instant, reliable communications with those who can help. Many of the "boomers" can recall that spring day in 1970 made famous by the Apollo 13 astronauts. (The rest of you probably have seen Tom Hanks re-create some of those historic events in the movie *Apollo 13*.) I submit to you that NASA's ultimate success in bringing home the Apollo 13 astronauts was attributable to getting the right folks involved and being able to communicate with them quickly. Without this communication, the three astronauts would have died of carbon dioxide poisoning (ground personnel talked them through how to build a scrubber) or overshot the earth on reentry (ground personnel told them how to aim and burn their engines). Literally hundreds of other things could have gone wrong; after all, the Apollo missions consisted of a set of very complex systems. The Apollo 13 situation was managed effectively because the "right" people were able to get involved through communications with one another, using tried-and-true procedures.

Everyone reading this article probably manages a complex system of some kind that is prone to any number of disasters. To effect a recovery of that system when things turn pear-shaped, nothing is more important than getting the right people involved, whether those people are employees, vendors, cleanup companies, hot sites, emergency services, or anyone else. There is no more lonely feeling than being cut off and on your own at the time when you need help most.

Failure Is Not an Option

In any commercial or government entity, an emergency response plan often means life or death to business continuity and to people. Can you restore the communications necessary to recover and to conduct business as usual? Surprisingly, few organizations are prepared to recover what the military calls "4C" (Command, control,

communications, computers, and intelligence) after a catastrophic event to let alone conduct business with their customers by phone. Let's consider each of these 4C areas just for a second.

- **Command and control.** This is the easiest area to understand. However, in a disaster it's difficult to be in control!
- **Communications.** This is *how* you stay in control. By getting instant situational analysis when things go boom, you'll be able to determine whether you should activate that expensive disaster recovery center and pay the big activation fee.
- **Computers.** As in the days of the Cold War, where "launch the missiles" decisions had to be made rapidly, business decisions today must also be made within minutes. In many cases, that necessary speed is too fast for people to achieve without the help of computers.
- **Intelligence.** We're back at knowing what's going on, what went bang, what it affected, and what you need to cancel your dinner reservations tonight or wake the CEO. You have to know what's going on in order to react properly.

Establishing and maintaining 4C capability is the most important first step in a recovery plan, for *any* organization, and I dare you to prove me wrong. Don't believe me? Try recovering something with your eyes and ears covered.

The Problem of Staying in Control in a Disaster

The two most immediate challenges of staying in control

- Alerting the "right" individuals to the disaster
- Delivering instructions to orchestrate a safe and effective response

Corporations, campuses or government must quickly *organize* and *disseminate* information to every "first responder," using every conceivable type of technology. Response teams often include a variety of departments and even other organizations: executives, building managers, security, fire control and emergency medical services, grief counselors, legal counsel, transportation, finance departments, information technology, telecommunications, and more. The technology used to notify these teams includes telephones, wireless phones, laptops, PDAs, email, and even two-way radio. The technology used depends largely on who's being notified, *via*, and where they are.

Even small firms can't survive a prolonged outage of a telephone cable cut, for example, without a plan. The real issue quickly becomes how any organization, large or small, can remain in control during the recovery process and establish 4C when phones are down. What if the telephone company is busy elsewhere or has a disaster itself? What if an organization plans for one disaster but a different one occurs? Can its plan change quickly? That has been all but impossible...until now.

The Right Stuff

A number of new technologies and services are available today to keep you in control in a disaster. These are designed to help get the word out *immediately* about any emergency, including severe weather, fire, sabotage and terrorism, system failures, and more. (The 2007 shootings at Virginia Tech are a noteworthy example.) These technologies are referred to as "mass notification systems." The purpose of a mass notification system is to "get the word out" to lots of people quickly, whether the message recipients are residents of a city, employees of a company, first responders such as police or fire, students on a campus, or whomever.

In the past, a person had to do the work, sitting at a telephone calling number after number. Later technology introduced equipment such as auto-dialers that called a list of numbers and played a recorded message. (Probably just leaving hundreds of voice mail messages, given the way we do business today.) Today, very advanced systems offer features such as "find me, follow me" that ring a responder's office, home, mobile phone, and/or pager numbers sequentially until the message is delivered. Some systems ask the recipient to press a key to acknowledge having received the message, assuring that a critical bulletin is not languishing somewhere on a voice mail system.

But mass notification is only one aspect of a full-blown 4C system. An equally important feature in such a system is the ability to restore inbound phone calls. This is a much more difficult problem. Recovery plans of the past responded to changed work locations by publishing "emergency" phone numbers that differed from the original numbers. This practice just doesn't work. In the heat of a disaster, people don't remember to look up new numbers.

Your customers certainly won't know those new numbers, either. Therefore, it's vital to redirect the original numbers to the emergency work location automatically, to maintain 4Ci in a disaster and assure your customers that everything is okay.

A company called Telecom Recovery provides an interesting package that accomplishes both of these goals. The system answers or directs inbound calls in order to maintain business as usual in the eyes of callers and customers, and also performs outbound notification. In the process, it also allows two essential capabilities:

- It enables the troubled business to redirect inbound calls without having to call the phone company. This is important: Imagine trying to get Bell South on the phone in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina.
- It allows for graceful coordination of hundreds of employees, citizens, or other first responders, by team and function. One cool feature is the ability to call specific groups of people by recovery team, for instance, and place them in instant conference with one another. This could be an indispensable means of retaining 4Ci in a disaster, because the machines, rather than you, remember the phone number.

Telecom Recovery states that there's no need to change service providers, and the solution is vendor-independent, meaning that all local, long distance, and toll-free services stay with your present provider. Because each vendor has different methods for forwarding calls, Telecom Recovery has proficiency in those technologies as well.

Evaluating a 4Ci System for Your Organization

You should look for the following features in any 4Ci system:

- **Ability to route any number to any other number.** A 4Ci system should allow *you* (not the phone company) to move mission-critical inbound numbers instantly to any working telephonic number that was lucky enough to survive the disaster. This could be a branch office, residence, wireless VoIP, or satellite phone.
- **Familiarity for the customer.** Any system of this type should give you the ability to duplicate the same call prompts (press 1 for sales, 2 for customer service, etc.) as in your current system. You shouldn't have to retrain your callers; in fact, if you do it correctly, callers may never even know that you've experienced disaster.
- **Ease of activation.** A 4Ci system should allow for "launch the missiles" accuracy in activation. It should give you multiple means of activating your plan, such as via a web connection, touchtone phone, PDA, etc. It's impossible to predict what technology will or won't survive a disaster, so give yourself every option.
- **Reaching responders *wherever they are*.** At home, in the office or the car, via pager, PDA, or text message, you should never lose touch with key first responders. Short of someone being in the bathtub, which for most people (except my daughters) is an endeavor of finite duration, you should be able to reach most responders within a reasonable time if you plan ahead. For example, look for a "find me, follow me" feature, which sequentially tries all possible contact devices until the person is found. Remember, you shouldn't be looking up numbers. If the system isn't smart enough to handle all this simply by dialing the original disaster number, you don't want it.
- **One-step callout of first responders.** The system should allow for emergency notification messages that can be instantly set up *by you* and broadcast to hundreds of responders based on the disaster. A good system allows the recipient to be prompted to press a digit to acknowledge hearing the recording, or to be placed instantly into a voice conference with other members of his or her team. This system should also keep a log of who was contacted successfully and who wasn't useful in any mass mobilization. A very desirable feature is "technology transparency." Emergency notification messages that can be sent to any message recipient's network-connected device (phone, PDA, pager, text, etc.), independent of the delivery medium, would be very useful indeed.
- **Allows for quick message changes.** Planning for one disaster but another happens? Count on that. Messages and call menus should be changeable in seconds from your phone or PC.
- **Fax both incoming and outgoing.** The system should forward incoming faxes to email accounts or hotel fax machines, or hold them in storage for later retrieval. The system also should be capable of sending faxes, including broadcasting to hundreds of locations.

I'm hot on these 4Ci notification systems because I believe that they have the potential to revolutionize the disaster recovery business. For example, why send people hundreds of miles to find workspace and lodging? With 4Ci technologies, any nearby hotel with high-speed Internet access can become a recovery center.

In Closing

I hope that you enjoyed this series on how to assign, mobilize, coordinate, and communicate with disaster recovery teams. Please feel free to [contact me](#) with any questions or comments. Meanwhile, I'll see you right here next month with more tips to helping your organization field a resilient business resumption plan. Good luck in your pursuits

NOTE

For more info on 4Ci technologies, do a web search on "mass notification systems" or "hosted PBX," or check out the executive overview at 4Ci.us.

Thanks to our friends at [Telecom Recovery](#) for their thoughtful contributions to this article
