

Exercising the Recovery Phase: Taking the Next Step

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ABSTRACT 299997:

All responses reach a phase in which the primary concern shifts from protecting life and property by controlling and mitigating the incident to recovering from the incident and restoring as near as possible the pre-incident conditions. This phase is rarely the subject of exercises. The advantages to “exercising the recovery” are pre-identification of priorities, pre-identification of needs, increasing the visibility of recovery problems, and identifying recovery organizations strengths and weaknesses.

Recovery priorities are a sensitive topic. Responder priorities often are different from those of the population impacted. This can lead to great discontent, confusion, and wasted resources. A common example is focusing on restoring automated banking facilities before the restoration of electricity. The resources devoted to the former would be better used on the latter. Pre-identification of priorities and communicating those will reduce problems later.

“What is needed to recover from this incident?” is best asked before the incident. Identifying the most basic needs will lead to a very large list. If those needs are pre-identified by means of an exercise, then preparations to create stockpiles, contracts with response organizations, and perhaps even locating staging areas and transportation blocks can begin before an incident occurs.

Increasing the visibility of potential recovery problems will allow planners to more effectively provide decision makers and money managers justification for expending pre-incident resources on essential incident recovery assets. Assets that have been pre-identified are that much closer to use.

Exercises that identify a recovery organization's strengths and weaknesses prepare participants for eventual use and better integration into the overall response. Participants develop knowledge of each other's organizations and what that organization brings to the recovery efforts. That knowledge is at a premium during a response.

Using exercises to identify recovery priorities, identify recovery needs, increasing the visibility of recovery efforts, and evaluating recovery organizations should be an increasing part of the responder's exercise programs.

INTRODUCTION:

All emergencies have a start and end. In most cases, the end is straightforward, however, a large incident such as a major oil spill or chemical release may not have an end for some considerable time and another phase of the response must be considered. The recovery phase is critical but unfortunately it is very rarely the subject of an exercise. Many exercises run one or two operational periods after the beginning of the exercise then the exercise is stopped. It is time to consider this important phase and look at some aspects of exercises devoted to working out some of the difficulties of the recovery.

Pre-identification of Priorities

When you ask the question as to what the recovery priorities are on would think the unanimous and universal answer would be to ultimately recover the majority of the product. Unfortunately, the response isn't necessarily deemed a success even if most of the product is accounted for in the end. Why is this?

A response is as much about managing expectations as it is about recovering product. Everyone has a passion that drives their concerns whether it is from an environmental point of view, economically driven, etc. These personal values, usually coupled with their dual occupational stance play a big part in dictating what the individual deems the priorities should be. These diverse opinions are as much a blessing as a curse. Which they will turn out to be will weigh heavily on the method of communication of said interests and how well the expectations of those interests are managed.

Local politics can play a significant part in the recovery planning. Even with an Area Contingency plan to guide the response efforts; politics driven by economic concerns can have competing demands on response priorities. Communication and coordination of efforts during the response can address multiple priorities at the same time and further the response recovery efforts.

Also, the duration of the impact varies significantly relative to the area impacted. For instance, a facility whose pier is impacted could be pressure washed and cleared for use in a shorter period of time than say a beach that might be closed for an entire season. Although the public is impacted by the reduced commerce from the facility the majority of them might not feel or see it as readily as having their beach closed.

“What is needed to recover from this incident?” is best asked before the incident. The Area Contingency Plan outlines the specific environmental areas of concern and gives guidance on priorities. That information coupled with weather/sea conditions, equipment capabilities, time and politics will drive the remaining priorities.

All these opinions aside priorities are somewhat driven by a natural order. As mentioned before, clearing a pier for commerce to resume is only half the battle if the shore side facility has other factors preventing it from resuming operation then a clear pier doesn't necessarily solve the problem. So, is removing the product our level we measure success by or is getting what was affected back in working order.

Pre-Identification of Needs

Identifying what is needed for a recovery can be eased somewhat by use of pre-incident recovery exercises. A recovery exercise can assist in identifying in advance of an actual recovery situation recovery requirement, recovery capabilities, access issues, and best locations for staging areas, special skills and potential alternatives.

Pre-identifying requirements for a recovery will be eased by pre-recovery exercises. Most exercises end well before the recovery stage is reached and recovery problems are generally not addressed in the post-exercise discussions or evaluations. This means the requirements for a successful recovery aren't addressed. An exercise dedicated to the recovery specifically will quickly indicate that a list of priorities must be developed that come from shared goals and requirements. A recovery will not be smooth if a logical set of goals cannot be identified ahead of time. The Unified Command/Incident Command (UC/IC) is best served if a set of pre-identified pre-recovery requirements is already in existence. Questions of which public service must be restored first and "how clean is clean?" are best answered before the incident even begins.

Any recovery exercise that is well done will identify the capabilities needed to meet the recovery requirements. Many initial responders are well equipped to provide for the initial response but less so for long term recovery operations. The problems of the recovery are often different from those of the initial response. For instance, companies that are well equipped with spill equipment such as skimmers and boom may be less well equipped with beach cleaning equipment such as sufficient heavy earth moving machinery. The upshot of this situation is that separate response companies or companies specializing in some aspects of heavy construction, electrical repair, and hazardous waste management identified during the recovery exercise will have to become part of the pre-event or pre-incident planning and exercise cycle.

Access to the area of an incident is going to be restricted during the incident itself and perhaps restricted during the incident recovery phase as well. Recovery exercises can be used to model potential blockages and bottlenecks. The best crane is useless if it can't get to where it is needed and the recovery planning will have to be adjusted if it is

delayed because alternate routes must be found. Recovery exercises are an excellent method for modeling “what if ...” scenarios ahead of an actual recovery. This makes them an invaluable tool for planners and operators that shouldn’t be ignored.

Related to the issue of access is the need to use pre-incident recovery exercises to determine where staging areas may be put for greatest effectiveness. A table top exercise is good for this and, when possible, actually exercising the breakout and staging of equipment is recommended. If an areas bridges and soil won’t accommodate some kinds of equipment due to weight, it is far better to find out by means of an exercise than find out during an actual recovery. An exercise may also reveal multiple staging areas are required due to the size of the incident exercised or the geography that is present.

A recovery exercise will quickly reveal that some specialized skills will needed for the recovery. The ability to identify these skills during a less stressful exercise means that preparations can be made to address the availability of those skills through means such as training and education, or pre-event contracts. If one waits until an actual recovery then one has waited too long. The available pool of those with specialized skills may not be big enough or available in a timely fashion with the consequent negative consequences. A timely recovery exercise may prevent embarrassing lacunae at a critical time.

Finally, recovery exercises provide a low impact way of finding and evaluating alternative priorities, capabilities, accesses, staging and skills that may be used during a recovery. This can save valuable time when a recovery is in progress. Stopping in the middle of a recovery because no alternative is available is going to be unacceptable and will create a strongly negative perception of the response. A recovery exercise that identifies viable alternatives ahead of the need is much better.

Increasing the Visibility of Recovery Problems

Exercises can be used to identify a recovery organization's strengths and weakness prior to an incident. By exercising the recovery stage there are several benefits that will aid in creating a better process of passing from the response phase to the recovery phase. These benefits are in identifying who should participate in the recovery, creation of pre-incident contacts, better relationship building in a less stressful environment, and preparing for the difficult challenges of public affairs/external affairs during the recovery.

Identification of who should participate in a recovery is best done before any spill or incident. A recovery exercise would allow this to be done by identifying skills and resources that will be needed during the recovery. For example, the locality or responsible party is unlikely to have all the skills and resources to perform heavy operations such as beach cleaning or the restoration of piers and wharves that have been impacted by an oil spill. If identified during an exercise, specialists and contractors can be engaged ahead of time and the resulting time awaiting recovery resources can be reduced. Failure to identify recovery participants in advance will delay the recovery and create the impression that the overall response is at best slow and uncoordinated.

Creating pre-incident contacts is clearly important before any incident. It is no less different for the recovery phase. Ideally, the persons and organizations involved in the recovery should already know the responders and resources that responded to the initial incident. However, this is not always true and the creation of confusion and misunderstandings can hinder the development of plans that go beyond response and into recovery. Recovery exercises allow for the formation of a list of contacts of those resources that have needed specialized skills such as earth moving, construction or waterside operations. They also identify those resources who are best carried over from the initial response. Examples of these resources might be logistical in nature such as food services or financial such as who pays costs that are more recovery in nature rather than response.

Relationships are vital part of any recovery. Once the resource has been identified and then contacted they must be integrated in a recovery. This integration process can be eased by a recovery exercise. The participants can place faces with e-mails or voices

over a phone. Sources of tension can be addressed without the added stress of actually trying to performing recovery tasks at the same time. Questions can be answered in an environment that is far less threatening and if necessary dealt with in privacy to prevent embarrassment. The more relationships that are created between the initial responders, the recovery specialists, and other stakeholders, the better. “You should not be meeting your counterpart at two o’clock in the morning,” is as true for the recovery as it is for the initial response. There is no such thing as a perfect turnover but good relationships will smooth the process and help minimize the likelihood of important information not be passed.

Public/External Affairs do not lose their importance simply because the response has passed to the recovery phase. Stakeholders external to the response naturally expect to be kept notified about the process of recovery since their plans are obviously reliant on the status of any recovery. Recovery exercises give those responders who are going to be the outside world’s “face of the recovery” a chance to view the complexity of the recovery phase and prepare themselves for the kinds of questions they may have to face during a recovery. A recovery exercise gives the public/external affairs specialists the foreknowledge they need to better inform the public and answer the inevitable questions that will arise. This can only help calm already upset minds.

Intelligent use of recovery exercises will enhance our abilities to provide a better response to a spill or incident. By identifying participants, forming pre-incident contact lists, building and reinforcing relationships, and addressing recovery specific public/external affairs issues; a recovery exercise is a valuable response tool.

Identifying Recovery Organizations Strengths and Weaknesses

If exercising recovery operations is a relatively new challenge, so is evaluating the process. What makes for a successful recovery? Is it based on specific performance, cost savings, restoration of normalcy, public opinion or something else? In short, we have to review what portions of a recovery plan or what capabilities are being validated within the exercise.

If we are looking at a specific performance issue, then we should consider whether assigned tasking was conducted in an appropriate manner and in a reasonable time. We may need to evaluate the understanding of a particular portion of a recovery plan being tested.

Cost is a bit easier to measure, but may be more difficult to validate. How much did a particular activity cost (manpower, resources, time and materials, etc.) and how did this valuation fit into our overall estimation. One very important thing to note is that recovery done under OPA 90 is vastly different than recovery activities conducted under the Stafford Act. It is incumbent upon response managers and the responsible party to ensure that state and local representatives are cognizant of the differences and that any questions they have are adequately addressed. Misunderstanding on these two laws led to regulatory confusion at the local level in some areas impacted by the DEEPWATER HORIZON oil spill of 2010—misunderstandings that required Coast Guard Branch Directors and Liaisons to dedicate time and effort to educating elected officials on the National Contingency Plan.

“How clean is clean?” has been a challenge of every response since EXXON VALDEZ and the implementation of the Oil Pollution Act of 1990. Now we want to assess something slightly different, and potentially more subjective. Did we restore a particular area to its pre-event condition or did we at least do the most we could without further damaging the environment.

Lastly, what is the public perception of our recovery endeavors? You can easily compare and contrast the efforts of the federal, state, and local governments after Hurricane Katrina hit the Gulf Coast in 2005 with the efforts of the federal, state and local governments after Hurricane Ike hit the Upper Texas Coast in 2008. The Katrina recovery was plagued with a myriad of coordination issues that led to a very slow recovery. The Ike response was well coordinated amongst the stakeholders and the recovery conducted far more quickly to the benefit of the general public and industry.

So, evaluation criteria should address:

1. Were the contents of the plan clear and concise with enough direction to initiate recovery activities?
2. Were all key stakeholders identified and was the contact information accurate?
3. Were resource providers identified within the plan and was their contact information accurate?
4. Did responders have a comprehensive understanding of the capability of recovery resources?
5. Were Shoreline Cleanup Assessment Teams able to provide accurate and timely data to assist in decision making?
6. Were resource alternatives and process alternatives considered as part of the Recovery Planning Process?
7. If appropriate, were law enforcement and security issues considered and resource requirements balanced in terms of disaffected citizens or the potential of terrorist activity?
8. Were Recovery Objectives developed in a manner that met the “SMART” criteria for objectives?
9. Was the Logistics Section able to adequately address and anticipate support requirements?
10. Were financial mechanisms in place to adequately support the recovery?
11. Was a process developed and implemented to determine “How Clean is Clean?”

12. Was a process developed and implemented to address geographic areas for sign off as being clean/recovered/restored?
13. Was the Joint Information Center appropriately staffed and skilled to address short and long-term recovery efforts?
14. Were effective means in place to address the needs of external stakeholders and other concerned parties?
15. Was the political leadership cognizant of the recovery plan specifics and were they able to adequately support it?

CONCLUSIONS:

Recovery exercises are relatively rare today because most exercises end after a relatively short period of time due to exercise and real-world considerations. This is not considered a problem for most ICS events, but for large events such as a major oil spill, hurricane or other major incident, the recovery must be considered and, if possible, exercised. A good recovery exercise will pre-identify priorities, pre-identify needs, increase the visibility of recovery problems, and identify various recovery organization's strengths and weaknesses. It is time that civil authorities – responders start exercising the recovery like the early part of the incident.

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