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From The Times

April 16, 2008

What not to do in a crisis

Unless we're like James Bond, all of us have had a moment of panic when a cool head should rule

Clare Dight

Crisis? What crisis? When an organisation - or an individual - is in a hole, it's all too easy to panic and just keep digging. Far harder to take decisive action to limit the damage to your reputation and face the consequences of your actions. Here are a few examples of what not to do when things go pear-shaped. After all, hindsight is a marvellous thing.

Pass the buck. "One of the worst things that you can do when faced with a major incident is to say that it's someone else's fault - even if it was," says Andy Jarosz, the head of crisis management at docleaf, a crisis management consultancy. When everything else is going wrong is precisely the right time to display the three c's of crisis management: competency, compassion and confidence. The boardroom scene at the end of *The Apprentice* is a classic example of a post-crisis meltdown. "They're all fighting for their lives and passing the blame," he says.

Keep digging. As a fresh-faced young graduate, Stevan Rolls, now the HR director at Deloitte, had just joined a consultancy that specialised in search selection software when a day at a trade fair went from bad to worse. Having forgotten to bring the disks that were required to set up the software demonstration, Rolls set about trying to make amends by following his boss's instructions and tinkering with the computer. "I was panicking and trying to do it much too quickly," he says. "I found myself pressing delete *.* but I was in the root directory and I completely wiped the hard drive. The screen kept scrolling and scrolling down. I had to try very hard to resist the temptation to run out screaming and stay to face the music."

Rolls remembers that his boss had time for a few very harsh words before setting about trying to rebuild the hard drive. "I had been overconfident," Rolls says. "To be successful you've got to have had some failures in your career - and learnt from them - otherwise you have probably been too conservative." And something else that he gleaned from the experience: "Don't shout at junior employees when they get something wrong."



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come to blows with the managing director of a big corporation where several people had been killed in a terrible accident and he absolutely refused to talk to the media or allow anyone to say anything to anybody. The assumption 'was guilty as charged' because the guy wouldn't say anything, even though there was a lot that they could have said to put their case."

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crisis plans in place, but none for hurricanes," Bland says.

Try parsnips. Dan Ronald, now the regional managing director for the North West at Aldi, had been with the supermarket chain only a few months when he learnt the most fundamental rule of retail: give the customers what they want. Ten years ago, when a graduate trainee, Ronald was in charge of a store over Christmas. After carefully analysing the sales figures he ordered 100 cases of Brussels sprouts for Christmas Eve to satisfy customer demand for a festive lunch with all the trimmings.

Or, at least, he thought he had. "I rushed it," he says. "And instead of putting in 100, I put in 10." He spent the next day in confessional mode, apologising to customers. By accepting the blame without hesitation, Ronald probably also saved his bacon. He was also blessed with a Plan B: frozen sprouts or extra parsnips. But the experience had a lasting impact: "You spend the next few years having nightmares about sprouts around Christmas Eve," he says.

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