Comparative overview of the new British Standard for crisis management BS 11200 with NFPA 1600

By Dominic Cockram, director, Regester Larkin
The 2010 Macondo tragedy, which saw 11 workers killed and millions of barrels of oil spilled in the Gulf of Mexico, is an example of an organisation managing the operational response well but failing to address adequately the strategic challenges of a crisis. During the response, BP, along with its partners and the authorities, eventually developed industry-leading solutions to resolve deep-water issues that had never before been encountered. However, the management of the wider, strategic crisis that BP faced in terms of stakeholders, communications and leadership was seen as ineffective, leading to the eventual replacement of its CEO. This failure at the corporate strategic response level is, in my experience, not unusual. While many organisations have effective operational response plans, less pay attention to developing and maintaining a strategic crisis management capability.

It is this gap that was one of the drivers for the development of a new British Standard, Crisis Management – Guidance and Good Practice BS 11200 ('The Standard') by the British Standards Institution and UK Cabinet Office. The Standard was launched in September at the Crisis Management Conference 2014 in London and I was privileged to be part of the development process as a member of the BS 11200 committee. It fills a significant gap for those in public and private sector organisations looking for guidance on developing and maintaining a crisis management programme. The Standard is an excellent summation of the core areas of crisis management and has been created as a Guidance document rather than in the style of a more detailed Specification. The Standard is aimed at the top management of an organisation and focuses on how to build a crisis management capability rather than specifying exactly what the program should contain. This BS keeps the BS to a minimum!

**Definition of terms and concepts**

The first half of the Standard begins with an outline of terms, definitions of the core concepts around crisis management and a set of principles. It clearly differentiates between an incident and a crisis. The Standard focuses on how to manage a crisis, defined as ‘an abnormal and unstable situation that threatens the organisation’s strategic objectives, reputation or viability’, as opposed to ‘lower level’ incidents that have a different set of characteristics. It includes guidance on how to build a crisis management capability outlining how to develop a crisis management framework, the structure of a crisis management plan, team composition and guidance on team operation from response through to recovery and review. The Standard also suggests how to integrate a crisis management system with risk assessment processes, such as horizon scanning, and how to develop effective information management processes and situational awareness, both of which are key to the success of a crisis response.

The latter half of the Standard focuses on some of the softer yet essential skills associated with responding to a crisis: crisis leadership, strategic decision-making and crisis communications. Again, it focuses on providing guidance on how to address these key issues and will help users develop a better understanding of these non-technical skills in the extraordinary context of the crisis arena. The final section addresses training, exercising and learning from crisis to ensure that the organisation can build, embed, maintain and continuously improve an effective crisis management capability.

**Similarities between BS 11200 and NFPA 1600**

There are significant similarities between BS 11200 and the NFPA Standard 1600 Disaster / Emergency Management and Business Continuity:

- Both contain details of what a system should contain although NFPA 1600 is more detailed.
- Both provide a great deal of explanatory information (the ‘how’) and the Annex A to NFPA 1600 contains some useful templates and tables.
- Both highlight the need for integrating risk, emergency, crisis and business continuity management.
- Both stress the need for clear structures, processes, trained personnel along with a regular regime of testing and exercising.
- And finally, both are set out as voluntary Standards and are not the basis for regulation or formal certification, which gives users significant flexibility when adapting them for their individual organisation.

**Notable differences**

However, although there is a great deal of similarity, there are notable differences. Firstly, those familiar with NFPA 1600 should note that the term ‘incident’ has a different meaning in BS 11200. NFPA 1600 defines an incident as any event with potential negative effect up to and including a crisis, whereas as I have already described, BS 11200 differentiates between an incident and a crisis.

Also, although NFPA sets out to be a full spectrum system, it seems to focus more on the operational
aspects of a response and the strategic elements of crisis management are somewhat overlooked. By contrast, BS 11200 is aimed at the strategic level and does not address the operational response in detail.

The broader meaning of ‘incident’ means that NFPA 1600 only uses the term ‘crisis’ in the context of crisis communications. While the NFPA guidance on this topic is clear and sensible, the solitary use of the term ‘crisis’ here feels a little out of place. Nevertheless, this is another area of overlap between the two documents; both acknowledge the need for effective external communications during a response and this is a good example of an area where the additional detail in BS 11200 would complement NFPA 1600.

Another important area of difference is that NFPA 1600 addresses business continuity planning in detail whereas BS 11200 does not, instead referencing ISO 22301, the International Standard for Business Continuity Management Systems – Requirements. Given the complexity of business continuity management systems, the guidance in NFPA 1600 feels a little light and users may need additional detail.

Summary
NFPA 1600 focuses very much on “what” an entity should have in place to manage an incident and its immediate impacts. BS 11200 focuses more on the “how” you might conduct a response; lighter on the “what” and more guidance on the “how” but directed primarily at the strategic level (although the principles apply across all levels). Using both Standards as handrails in development would certainly ensure nothing is left in doubt and allow differing approaches according to the culture of the organisation.

For anyone aware of the need for a thorough crisis management programme, but lacking the detail on how to go about this, BS 11200 will provide helpful guidance, particularly to the top-level of an organisation. The focus on the how, rather than the what, will be of particular use to those who have a basic system in place but need additional material to help develop and embed the softer skills required by the team to manage a crisis.

While having this guidance to hand would in no way have guaranteed BP’s success with the strategic response to Macondo, following the approach advocated in BS 11200 may have improved the organisation’s handling of the strategic issues, media and stakeholder relations and lessened the reputational damage.

This article appeared in the February 2015 issue of the IAEM Bulletin, the monthly newsletter of the International Association of Emergency Managers. For information about IAEM, please visit www.iaem.com.

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