Episode Two: Supermodels and terrorists

How to get buy-in for continuity.

If some people have an aptitude for disaster, why is it so boring to others? Business Continuity has a bit of a PR problem – people who aren't already bought-in commonly dismiss it as boring or expensive or difficult.

It is impossible to have good continuity plans in place if the organisation isn't engaged. So how do the best Business Continuity professionals influence and motivate?

Use the right language

First of all, the language commonly used to describe continuity and recovery doesn't always endear itself to sceptical audiences. Even the word "disaster" has unavoidable negative connotations that influence how organisations approach the topic altogether. The marketing messaging around BC and DR can be hyperbolic at times, giving undue airtime to worst-case scenarios like environmental disasters and terrorist attacks.

Vicki Gavin, Head of Business Continuity and Information Security at The Economist, sums it up nicely:

"When we plan, we tend to think of these horrific things that we're frightened of, and think that they're going to happen.

"And in fact if we look at the actual likelihoods, the situation is quite different. As a man, you are 105 times more likely to date a supermodel than be involved in a terrorist event. So rather than looking for the terrorist event, I'd be looking for the supermodel."

The recommendation is then to discuss these challenges in way more palatable to the business: more "Business Continuity", less "Disaster Recovery"

For Michael Faber, Director at the Institute of Operational Risk, continuity is all dependent on how the business experiences "disaster". The world could be coming to an end outside, but if continuity is maintained and the business operates normally throughout, it might as well not have happened:

"The reason why, in my view, the industry changed its term, was in some good, subtle reasons. DR is a very negative term. Disaster is very negative.

"What we should be looking to ensure is that we never have a disaster to the business."

"So if we can ensure that we keep the business running, if we can ensure that our clients or customers don't walk away because of the way we've handled it, we actually haven't had a disaster to the business. You know, my late father said 'prevention is the best cure.'"

Overcoming resource constraints

Using the right language to communicate with the business is essentially about overcoming semantic problems, but no amount of clarity can address the far more common objections of resource constraints.

Whether it's time, money or expertise, good continuity is often regarded as a demanding, laborious exercise that's often peripheral to core business activities.

However, once you unpick these reservations a little, the problem seems less about actual resources as it is about priorities. Matt Hogan of the London Fire Brigade has spoken to organisations large and small about this, and regardless of how much time or money is available, without an internal continuity champion driving adoption, it's simply easier to ignore things and devote attention to other projects.

"Risk assessment is never the most exciting thing to be involved in. I'll say that to start with. My take on it: if you've got a really complicated industry, if you work in a big financial institution or something like that, then I think having somebody that really gets Disaster Recovery / Business Continuity is really important, because they've got so many different competing agendas within their business that you need a champion to highlight the risk there. In the smaller businesses, if you're looking at micro-businesses, sole-traders, that sort of thing, actually, they can't have a single person just doing disaster recovery, they need to be broader."

Michael Faber agrees –time is often the most difficult organisational resource to acquire, and how to go about securing it.

"The main reason why it wouldn't be successful or would be pushed onto the back burner is because everybody, and certainly in many of the organisations I've worked in, have day-to-day priorities. So in IT it would be somebody either banging on the desk saying 'This doesn't work' or 'I need this yesterday'. So which priority are you going to put first? The managing director standing at your desk, saying 'I need this now', or something that may never happen. And that's something that is a constant issue for people like me.

"The thing to do is never give up. So you may have to change your approach, you may have to go for half, even though you wanted a whole. You may have to bide your time. But the key thing is to get the confidence of the business, first of all.

"Actually money is sometimes easier to get, from a business than it is their time."

Emphasise practical utility

"As you can imagine, post-9/11 New York, and our offices were located at the other end of Wall Street, so 5 block's walk from the towers. People were antsy. Best way to describe it. Nobody was comfortable. So my role was really about confidence, and making sure that people understood we had plans in place.

"IT departments the world over, for a lot of years, have done seat-of-the-pants.

"Bad stuff happens and everybody scrambles. And generally, there's a lot of goodwill and everybody in IT pulls together and gets it happening."

"But in a post-9/11 world, there was all of a sudden a desire for more senior levels to have assurances that they would be able to do that. Not just a 'Yeah, you guys are gonna work hard and do the best you can', but something that says: 'We've thought about it, and this is what the problem looks like and this is how we're going to solve it.'"

Don't resort to scaremongering, keep conversations grounded in fact

Mel Gosling is a fellow of the Business Continuity Institute and the owner of Merrycon Business Continuity Solutions.

"People made a lot of money out of frightening people."

"I don't like fear-based selling; I hate it. In fact, if you do some research on who I was, you'll probably find the only thing I'm really famous for is debunking what I call the 80% myth. You must have heard the spurious statistic, 80% of businesses that don't have a Business Continuity Plan or IT Disaster Recovery Plan fail within 18 months of an incident. That's an absolute load of rubbish. I've spent a lot of time researching that."

So, if fear-based selling doesn't work, what does resonate with people? Matt Hogan has a more solid approach – The London Risk Register:

"What we do is take a broad group of experts, people that work in London, work with the organisations that we work with - the emergency services, local government, health services, etc. - and say to them:

"'What could happen here? What are the risks that London faces?' And we've gone through a process of doing that over...oh, we must be into our tenth year of the risk register now, and I think there are 67 different risks in there. Different scenarios that could affect London: I think there's flooding, transport accidents, there was at one time, though we've recently removed it, a caterpillar in there, because there's a particular caterpillar, the oak processionary moth, that can exacerbate respiratory conditions and things, and that was potentially a hazard at the time. It's not just the things you see in the news, the terrorist things or the cyber threats. It's lots of different scenarios. And we work then with experts in those industries to say, 'What's the risk of that happening, how often has it happened in the past? When it happened in the past, what were the impacts of it?' And we score the risks then based on their likelihood and their impact, and then that helps us prioritise what we do."

"Obviously we can't have 67 different plans for things. So we take what are the common consequences of the risk - so, the need to evacuate people from their homes, the need to decontaminate people if they've been exposed to a substance - lots of different common consequences that appear in lots of different risks, and develop plans for those. So, we've got a London evacuation framework, a way to provide people with shelter if they've been made homeless because of an emergency. We've got a specific flood response plan, because that's particularly high risk in London, and work on that basis rather than lots of different plans.

"Risk can be a positive thing as well, there are opportunities within risk, and all businesses are, whether they know it or not, they're dealing in risk every day, so it is just an extension of what they do in normal operation really."

Anyone can benefit from continuity and recovery planning. The hyperbole around the subject alienates a huge number of organisations that would benefit from simply writing down what they would do in response to specific scenarios. That's why projects like the London Risk Register are so important – they demystify risk in a very real way and make the tools and information needed to plan effectively available to organisations of all sizes and readiness levels. More than anything, they keep conversations grounded, relevant and useful. You can take a look at The London Risk Register here.