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Rapid Reflection Forces put to the reality test

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Since 2006, EDF (Electricité de France) has led the Rapid Reflection Force (RRF), a closely-knit, small team of high-level managers. As one of the authors points out, “The RRF is a group of individuals who do not come from a specific function but are called into action when the need arises.”

I N 2006, THE AUTHORS LAID OUT A NEW CONCEPT FOR CRISIS MANAGEMENT. IN CRISIS, THE DRIVING FORCE FOR CHANGE IS NOT JUST THE TOP EXECUTIVE, BUT THE ENERGISED, DEEPLY ENGAGED LEADERSHIP AT THE CE LEVEL. THE RRF WAS THE FIRST ATTEMPT TO STIMULATE THIS LEVEL OF ENGAGEMENT.

The RRF's mission is to help leaders get beyond their own biases, develop a broader perspective, and connect with their employees. It is a process of rapid reflection, an approach to crisis management that is constantly evolving. The RRF's work is based on the idea that the most effective responses to crisis come from a partnership between the leadership and the organisation's employees.

In 2006, EDF had a series of large-scale incidents that tested their crisis management capabilities. The RRF was brought in to help the organisation deal with these challenges and to develop a more effective approach to crisis management. The RRF's work involved bringing together leaders from different levels of the organisation to think critically and creatively about the challenges they were facing.

The RRF's work was highly regarded within the organisation, and it quickly became clear that the RRF was a valuable tool for crisis management. The RRF was able to help EDF develop a more strategic approach to crisis management, and it was able to help the organisation learn from its mistakes and improve its crisis management capabilities.

Over time, the RRF's work has evolved, and it has become a highly regarded tool for crisis management. The RRF's work is based on the idea that the most effective responses to crisis come from a partnership between the leadership and the organisation's employees, and it is this partnership that has been the key to the RRF's success.
Therefore, a new special training programme was created which combines both teaching (lessons drawn from recent on-site case studies at worldwide level), and simulations confronting very difficult and ‘strange’ scenarios.

The second imperative is that each team working in the crisis centre should be given specific preparation to improve its capacity to interact with the RRF. A programme is now underway creating an operational tool-kit on unthinkable crises, or even conventional crises that suddenly mutate into inconceivable events. A DVD will be available by this March, combining basic texts, slides, and short videos aimed at heightening the viewer’s awareness of these issues and to prod them to modify their approaches.

In addition, specific sessions for each group (operations, communication and leadership) should be held to cultivate the necessary change in dynamics.

The key outcome, to date, has been a near-universal acknowledgement that critical improvements are required. Even the best practices developed over the last decades must be revisited – and all agree that the RRF can help this happen.

Today’s crises tend to overwhelm traditional crisis management mechanisms and organisational frameworks. In so doing, they trigger ‘stun effects’, as even trusted best practice becomes outmoded. In this context, it is crucial that teams and individuals in charge feel that their organisation includes a group of people devoted to precisely addressing such impossible challenges, and available to help where and when needed – all the while trusting that their own role is not undermined in the process.

**PILLAR OF STRENGTH**

Real life incidents and exercises have shown that the RRF can genuinely become a pillar of strength around which an organisation can coalesce. The RRF can benefit all. On a global scale, it can help an entire organisation – and international – have expressed a group of people devoted to precisely addressing such impossible challenges, and available to help where and when needed – all the while trusting that their own role is not undermined in the process.

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The crucial issue at stake was underlined by the White House Report on Hurricane Katrina: “Our current system for homeland security does not provide the necessary framework to manage the challenges posed by 21st century catastrophic threats.”

Our cartography of risks and crises is outdated. Our best practice still lags one war behind. Unfortunately, official reports often do little more than string together a litany of recommendations that call for more of the same. Such conventional thinking is not the way to confront emerging risks and crises.

Granted, it is now fashionable to call for new public-private partnerships, for benchmarking, for more communication and more simulation exercises. But we are far from the conceptual revolution which would turn these mantras into more than empty slogans. Many people seem vaguely aware that this is not enough, that a *terra incognita* somehow lies beyond old and outmoded approaches.

The RRF is a gateway into this unknown area, a new instrument to begin charting emerging risks and crises, and the appropriate responses. This is because it focuses on questions, on creativity, rather than on ready-made answers. It calls for, and elicits, the sharing of questions, intuitions, and open-minded approaches. It concentrates on flagging specific ways out, not on the absurd ambition to develop global, final answers. Those are no longer attainable – if they ever were – in today’s chaotic environment.

This capacity to provide a pillar of strength that doubles up as a signpost explains why so many officials – private and public, French and international – have now expressed their interest in the RRF, fully aware that it is more than a just another tool, another best practice. With increasing frequency, many have asked to come and see the RRF at work during simulation exercises for themselves.

The RRF has also proven to be a stimulus for high-level meetings on an international scale, through its attractiveness as a promising new avenue to grasping and confronting emerging issues of global import. It was one of the focal points of a seminar held by the Johns Hopkins University’s Center for Transatlantic Relations in Washington, in March 2007, and again during the international seminar on emerging crises convened by Morocco’s government in Casablanca in May of that year.

The RRF initiative is also the cornerstone of another recently launched initiative with critical operators (from the banking, transportation, telecommunication and water sectors) in France, with the aim of setting up a European partnership to tackle the most difficult issues related to crisis management in a chaotic world.

In a nutshell, the RRF has shown itself to be much more than the organisational add-on to crisis cells that had initially been envisioned. It is, in fact, a rare lifeline in today’s emerging environment of risks and crises. In this sense, it has undoubtedly gone far beyond expectations. It now behoves us to look forward and build upon this cornerstone. In the authors’ opinion, the best means to do so is to open new avenues for co-operation, be it with academia, experts, or leaders, with the crucial support of EDF.

This article will have fulfilled its objective if it brings us any closer to this goal.

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