Comments on "Interactive simulation and crisis management training"

KAUKO SIPPONEN
Council of Economic Organizations, Helsinki, Finland

I find Booth’s approach to crisis simulation reasonably logical and practical. Maybe it is somewhat academic, for emergency situations are usually more complicated and diversified than the process of interactive simulation suggests. On the other hand, if this kind of exercise were to include very many decision points, one would end up with an overly bushy decision tree. A more solid assessment of Booth’s proposed technique can only be given after a number of exercises are performed, reported and analyzed.

Crisis simulation: requirements

Simulation should be adapted to the administrative structure and general preparedness level of the political or organizational system concerned. For instance, it may be important to know whether the society in question uses conscription or maintains only a professional army. The former type of society will be better prepared for crisis management, as there are more (human) resources for operational tasks available. Similarly, a society with widespread voluntary participation in civil defence will be more amenable to large-scale crisis exercises than one without such a system.

Another important structural feature concerns the legal system. Interactive simulation should certainly take into account the limitations and legal ramifications imposed by existing laws. Also, it can serve as a testing device for thinking through the operational, administrative and political implications of using special by-laws and emergency provisions.

Thirdly, leadership styles and cultures prevailing in different organizations or parts of the political system may influence the course and outcomes of crisis management efforts. An organization or a regime used to ‘laissez-faire’ or ‘democratic’ leadership style will probably not adjust smoothly to more authoritarian modes of managing turbulence. A crisis of legitimacy may very well be one of the complicating side-effects of even an externally-triggered crisis situation. It is very hard to incorporate such elements into an interactive simulation, but it should nevertheless be taken into account.

Finnish experiences

Training for crisis management is rather widely practiced in Finland – e.g., in the army, police and even universities. This mainly concerns strategic and civil defence. Ninety percent of young Finnish males serve in the armed forces. For more than twenty years political leaders (e.g., members of Parliament), higher civil servants, as well as business leaders and journalists receive instruction and training on Finnish defence. In these courses simulations form a major part of the programme. On the basis of these experiences, similar role-playing exercises have been organized for the same class of participants dealing with economic policy issues.

In each province courses on defence are organized twice a year. Participants include civil servants in provincial and municipal administrations, company directors, civil defence specialists. The provincial governor is to stage a major provincial exercise in civil defence every forth or fifth year.

On the basis of these experiences I do not hesitate to conclude that the simulation technique has proved to be a useful tool in preparing key decision makers and public opinion leaders for certain types of crises. Of course, there are shortcomings. Even simulations may become a matter of routine: top-level participation decreases; the quality of instructors decreases; performance feedback from exercises is formulated in very broad and mild terms, with sufficient ambiguity to allow each participant to maintain a positive self-image about his performance. Maintaining high quality and, very important, sufficient variety in types of scenarios and exercises is a task that requires permanent attention.

Suggestions for further use

Crisis management, like management in general, is mainly a matter of communication optimization. Formal rules and key crisis management terms, like command, delegation and discretion, have different meanings and can be perceived differently by participants in one and the same event (whether it be a simulation or a real-life crisis). Therefore, one of the key tasks ahead in training for crisis management is to try and achieve more uniformity in the understanding of these concepts and their implications for action. This can be achieved only by rethinking and permanent development of crisis communication and information arrangements, including the restructuring of crisis management centres.

As Booth has pointed out, it is important to try and prepare decision makers for the impact of stress in crisis situations. Yet I feel he is overrating the