

MANAGING URGENT AND EMERGENCY RESPONSE PROJECTS



Highlights from the Major Projects Association event held on **8th November 2018**

Over the last decade project management methodology has focused on creating a controlled environment through structure and process. But what happens when an organisation has to respond to an emergency or disaster situation?

In an unstable and rapidly changing scenario where lives and assets are at risk and time is of the essence, do the standard governance structures and project management strategies crumble or prevail? What can we learn from recent high-profile disaster response and recovery programmes?

This Major Projects Association seminar sought to answer these questions via a series of case studies which looked at both domestic and international disaster response and recovery. The following key themes emerged:

- The importance of shared vision and purpose
- The culture of the organisation is key
- A strong sense of partnership is developed
- Care of both the community and staff must be prioritised
- A focus on professionalism is emergent
- New technologies can make a difference

THE IMPORTANCE OF SHARED VISION AND PURPOSE

In common with many other acknowledged successful projects, urgent and emergency projects were able to create an intense clarity of shared vision and purpose. Whilst these projects arose out of chaos and were complex in the detail of their implementation, the overall tangible nature of the high-level goal, be it reopening a railway line or reconnecting electricity to a community, created commitment and passion within the project team and between all stakeholders.

'It is not often in your career that you get the chance to do something that profoundly affects the lives of others.'

Carol Holt MBE, Deputy Director Flood Management, Environment Agency

CULTURAL ALIGNMENT

The importance of organisational culture was highly visible in an emergency response project. Firstly, the investment and commitment to planning and preparation underpinned the ability of an organisation to be able to step up to what was required in these

intense periods. Support, empowerment and flexibility to transition from the day job to the immediate needs of the crisis was key. As was the tone from the top, cascading behaviours through the team and out to stakeholders.

Transparency and absolute honesty with supply chain partners and the communities affected was required at all times. Individuals or companies that were unable to behave as expected needed to be removed and replaced as early as possible.

'The X-factor is organisational culture.'

Dr Toby Willison, Executive Director of Operations, Environment Agency

Key to success:

- Think big
- Act early
- Be visible

SENSE OF PARTNERSHIP

Effective partnerships in an emergency scenario are often built on established relationships and frameworks. This allows for trust in a safe pair of hands but may mean that specialist skills need to be bought in from other companies to provide all necessary capabilities. The impact of a powerful shared vision means that negative combative and competitive behaviours are removed in the drive to achieve the high-level, and often high-profile, objective.

The practice of involving locally based contractors and suppliers to build confidence in the community, put investment back into the local economy and access local knowledge was seen as fundamental to success. More flexible commercial contract models that empowered teams to bundle work packages, start work before all information was available and take a more realistic view of the apportionment of risk were beneficial in many cases.

'Make friends in peace time...so when things go pear-shaped at 4.00 a.m. in the morning you have an established relationship!'

Stephen Hall, Assistant Director, Highways and Transport Economy & Infrastructure, Cumbria County Council

Mott MacDonald have prepared a case study document outlining their work with Cumbria County Council entitled *Bridge by Bridge*. You can view the [case study here](#).

CARE OF THE COMMUNITY AND STAFF

From empathy and engagement with the local community through to safeguarding the physical and mental health of staff, wellbeing is paramount. In international and humanitarian disasters this is especially high profile, with individuals working in high-risk environments in remote locations. Counselling both pre and post operation are now routinely offered to staff.

However, even in domestic projects, the impact of stress and exhaustion caused by long hours, atrocious weather and emotional experiences requires both strong and sensitive leadership and self-awareness to protect staff health and wellbeing. It is important for senior staff to lead by example in striking the balance between commitment to the project and the need to take time off and get adequate rest. Several examples were cited of senior staff who had directly intervened to ensure those under most pressure felt able to take time off. You can read more related material on wellbeing from the recent [Major Projects Association seminar](#) on this topic.

In the very challenging circumstances of an emergency project it is worth remembering that the best decisions are not made by exhausted and stressed staff. Lessons can be learnt from remote overseas projects, where the duty of care to the team and community are established building blocks in the project methodology.

Once the preliminary recovery phase is complete, and the organisation and community are starting to return to more normal operations, the situation can often slip back into emergency phase, creating an extended period of intense activities. This could be caused by further poor weather, for example. People really need to pace themselves from the outset.

Part of having a healthy relationship with the individuals impacted by the emergency is to be realistic and honest about timescales and outcomes. Staff must be discouraged from giving false hope or over-optimistic timescales.

'We plan for things to go wrong in a perfect way. They don't!'

Ben Heatley, Director, Copper Consultancy

PROFESSIONALISM

Whilst it was acknowledged that at the outset of an emergency project you are often 'flying by the seat of your pants', the ongoing drive by organisations to professionalise their disaster response and recovery approach is evident. In particular, in response to scrutiny of failings by the humanitarian aid responses to the Rwandan genocide and the Indian Ocean tsunami of 2004, the creation of policy, procedures and good practice, encapsulated in the [Sphere Handbook](#), has resulted in an improved level of interagency communication, governance and professionalism. Despite this the NGO community is currently engulfed in a crisis around sexual exploitation, which shows there is still some way to go.

Interestingly, in more infrastructure-related projects, where contractors, project management specialists and engineers are the lead parties, it has been highlighted that the relaxation of standard governance structures and improved flexibility in decision-making has been important in ensuring rapid response and giving important early support and confidence to stakeholders and communities.

In allowing this relaxation, personal accountability is key, with lead personnel needing to demonstrate professionalism and integrity. Clear record-keeping and absolute clarity that there will be no compromise to safety or legal requirements allows everyone to know where they stand and revert to full governance at a later date.

POINTS FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION

- Whilst there are rehearsals for emergency response, no one seems to rehearse for emergency recovery. How can we create opportunities to practise, which may then drive innovation and better preparedness?
- Can we learn more from sectors that continually test response, such as oil and gas or the military?
- New technologies are available that can help with emergency recovery projects, but their use seems fragmented and not well understood. How can we stimulate greater awareness of these emerging ideas?

With grateful thanks to Dan Phillips of [Mott MacDonald](#) for his help in organising this event

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