Axel Lambert: How to handle crises

Axel Lambert advises organizations, companies and professionals on how to prepare for, react to and prevent health emergencies. After years of working with epidemics such as SARS, influenza and Ebola, Lambert is conscious of one thing: "You're never fully prepared."



March 1, 2020

People are often surprised that Axel Lambert de Rouvroit went to work in the public sector once he had an MBA. "Water flows in the other direction," he jokes. And yet the skills he learned at IESE would prove valuable in his role as senior advisor on bioterrorism and health emergencies at the French Ministry of Health (2003-2006), where he was responsible for drawing up, preparing for and managing the state response to crises such as Ebola, SARS and

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anthrax poisoning.

"It was impossible to sleep on that job. You never get bored. The task is never finished."

Nowadays he is an independent consultant on health security for organizations such as the European Commission and the World Health Organization, as well as for private companies.

We hear a lot about the idea of crisis, in business, in politics and elsewhere. What exactly does that mean in your field?

A crisis is an emergency situation that is too big for you to handle. The rest is just emergency situations. During a crisis you have to deal with the unpredictable. If you have a globalized supply chain, for example, then it's essential to think about the practical implications of closed borders, no trade, and cancelled flights and shipping, to name some of the things that can happen in a country affected by an epidemic. You need to know how that is going to affect your company. That is what I call business continuity planning.

Analyze, prepare and respond...

Response is when it happens, preparation is everything you do beforehand. You write a response plan even when you can't predict what will happen, because writing helps your planning. It's a little bit like strategic planning for business. You try to build scenarios: if this happens, what do we do? What tools do I have? This is something you learn during the MBA. Nevertheless, managers should try to think in a more long-term way.

How do you plan for the unexpected, for something that might put lives in danger?

I think it's important not just to plan, but to train. Rehearsing the scenario to train yourself to be able to work in an emergency situation. It is important to experience the fear, the tension, the stress. During an emergency, you are going to make bad decisions. That's how adrenaline works: you forget things. The best preparation is to put yourself in that situation.

And collaborate, with other countries, with other organizations.

One of the big lessons is that when you deal with sensitive matters -- such as human life -- it is important to have established trust beforehand. You cannot transfer sensitive information to somebody if you don't know what that person is going to do with it. You have to create those networks before the crisis. This is essential. But I've learned that trust is never between institutions; trust is between individuals, but you need the institution to build the system. This is something that I always keep in mind.

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Despite all the collaboration, there is often a lack of preparation.

When you are discussing the need for investment in research, vaccines, teams, preparedness and so on, and they reply, "Sorry, it's too expensive, there's nothing we can do about Ebola," it's very frustrating. Because when there is a real emergency, the money flows easily. The last big Ebola outbreak is an example. When the crisis was no longer in the news, the money dried up, but you need that funding to keep working on prevention. Otherwise, the consequences and costs, especially the indirect ones, will be much worse.

What kind of costs?

You can make comparisons between an economic crisis and a health crisis. One poin t in common is that both of them spread very fast in a globalized world. The second thing is the fear factor. An economic crisis almost always has a component of lack of confidence: people no longer trust the system. Health crises have a comparable effect, but the lack of trust is more a consequence than a cause. In both cases, they can lead to falling employment, rising financing costs, and so on. Just think that if you close an airport or borders -- which at any rate has been shown to be ineffective at stopping disease -- you are effectively closing trade routes.

The difference between an economic crisis and a health crisis is that in an economic crisis you have a central bank, an institution that can actually say, "Calm down, we will do what is needed to protect the currency." There are economic instruments to minimize the damage. A crisis of this type can still have a huge effect, but there are things you can do when it starts.

In health, however, if you haven't already done the preparation, it's too late. The Minister of Health cannot say, "I'll open the liquidity tap." There's no Mario Draghi (President of the European Central Bank between 2011 and 2019) to say, "We will do whatever it takes to preserve the euro." In health, people don't believe it. Words are not enough. What are you effectively doing? What do you have in place? The confidence and the trust needs to be established before the crisis.

During an epidemic you can't leave anything to chance, but at the same time you need to be flexible. How can you manage that?

The balance is not easy to reach. Historically, what we did was plan disease by disease. There was a plan for anthrax, a plan for an influenza pandemic, and so on. When you do this you realize that half the plan is the same for different diseases. So we changed a little bit and did some generic common ground planning for emergency operations. One comparison you can

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make is with firefighters. Every incident they deal with is different, but that does not mean that they cannot plan or train. You still need vehicles, equipment, trained people for different things and also, of course, coordination, communication, command and control.

Having said that, it's very important to always keep in mind that the crisis will not be the one you have been planning for. It always turns out to be different. As they say in the military: no plan survives contact with the enemy.

A version of this interview was published in IESE Business School Insight 150 (Fall 2018).

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