ANDREW GRAHAM AND JOHN RAINFORD

Tackling the
Emergency Preparedness & Response Challenge

What a year. Emergencies are unpredictable by nature, but the series of challenges faced by Canada in 2003 has been nothing less than remarkable. SARS, mad cow, the Ontario blackout, forest fires and hurricanes pushed public sector organisations to the limits of what they had planned for and, in many cases, beyond. What we are seeing is more than just a greater frequency of such occurrences. In many cases, they are more complex, more interconnected and demanding more international effort to resolve than ever before.

The fallout of such trials among the organisations involved is predictable. Responding to increased threat awareness among the public and media, increased concern among political leaders, and the real exposed weaknesses of response capacity, new energy and new money will be directed to the world of emergency preparedness and response. For a sector often forgotten or ignored, new resources are always a welcome development. New resources, however, are merely the first step in ensuring that we can fulfil our emergency related responsibilities. Those resources have to be applied in a way that makes sense, or more importantly, make a difference.

Earlier this year, as part of a research project through the School of Policy Studies at Queen's University we undertook an examination of decision making

What can Transport Canada's experience on September 11 teach us?

at Transport Canada on September 11, 2001. The findings confirmed what might seem obvious, Transport Canada's decision making performance was very strong in the face of extraordinary challenges few managers would have ever even dreamed possible. More significantly, however, the organisation achieved this success while over-riding many of the assumptions traditional emergency preparedness and response brings to the table. The issue this apparent contradiction raises is whether Transport Canada's decision making was wrong, or whether the way we plan for emergencies needs to be rethought. The key lesson is not to mistake formal emergency planning as a substitute for the effective leverage of the existing organisational culture in getting sound decisions made quickly.

The scope of the challenge faced by Transport Canada on 9/11 was staggering. Decisions ranged from urgent, such as the virtual re-writing of a regulatory framework to get the air sector safely up and running, to urgent in the extreme, such as where to land planes redirected from the United States and entering Canadian airspace at a rate of one every 45 seconds. The situation, no matter which way it is examined, matched the classic definition of crisis: severe threat, extreme time pressure and high uncertainty.

The research project focussed on three specific choices made by the department, all of which were taken on

the first day of the emergency response. Members of the senior decision making group were interviewed about the decision to halt all departures from Canadian airports; the decision of where to land the planes en route to North America, unable to turn back to their points of origin, unable to enter US airspace and representing an unknown security threat; and finally, the decision to grant or deny an exemption to the order to halt all air traffic on military, police or humanitarian grounds. These interviews, together with background information compiled on the case, provided a rare view of what happens around the decision making table when an organisation is thrown into crisis. The research revealed several intriguing findings.

The Real Contribution of Plans and Training

To our surprise, senior decision makers at Transport Canada did not have a strong familiarity with the formal emergency response systems, little experience with emergency exercises, and did not strictly follow the decision making model set out in the emergency plan. The fact that this was the case was not particularly unusual among government organisations. Executives are busy and often too busy to focus on practice before acting or reacting. However, acting in parallel with a formal emergency

system, senior leaders at Transport Canada delivered the policy decisions needed at the moment.

The department's emergency system tended to form more of a back drop to the key choices made. It was crucial in providing much of the infrastructure – for example a functional emergency operations centre -- that facilitated the decision making process. That decision making process, however, did not conform to many of the assumptions of the traditional emergency response model.

The Significance of Culture

Although Transport Canada did not conform to the decision making model as understood in traditional emergency management thinking, the approach that was followed had elements worth noting. Put another way, while the emergency decision making system designed specifically to manage the extreme elements of the crisis environment was not adhered to, the system that was followed acted as a well oiled machine. How was the system ale to function well, when experience shows how other systems start to fail in the crisis environment? The fact that the senior management team that had been in place for several years meant that working relationships, for example among the Minister's Office, the Deputy Minister's Office and the other key departmental decision makers

were well defined and well understood. The capacity to act quickly and decisively was served by the trust, and understanding that had built up over time.

As well, the decision making team reflected a measure of comfort and familiarity with the emergency response role of the department. There was evidence that the emergency function was understood to be a clear and significant element of the department's mandate and responsibility, but more significantly, part of its day to day functioning as well. Evidence to support this is in the fact that there was broad based consensus on the decisions under consideration. Often a sign of defective decision making, consensus in this context suggests a culture familiar with the aviation world and its particular rules and procedures.

Evidence of Adaptation

"As staff started flooding into the Situation Centre (Transport Canada's emergency operations centre) things very quickly became too crowded," recounted one senior manager explaining that the department had never before experienced such a broad based emergency and that multiple emergency teams were all assuming that they were required. "We threw out the normal security badges that permitted access to the centre and shifted instead to a

makeshift system. I grabbed an experienced manager and gave him the direct order to distribute handmade badges with his signature to those staff that had to be there. Everyone else was out. If you didn't have a pass with this guy's signature, you didn't get in."

The interview process revealed many similar anecdotes of how the department adapted systems and processes that failed to meet the demands of the day. Indeed, these often colourful moments were indicative of broader organisational adaptation. Throughout that first day of the response, organisational adaptation was much more evident than rigid adherence to pre-arranged processes and systems. The Department often left behind its emergency systems support to get to speedy and effective decisions.

Reinvestment Strategy

It struck us in the research project and in thinking about the emerging challenge to public sector organizations that reinvestment in emergency planning and response capacity is an important priority. But it has to be done right, and "right" may be a significant challenge. Systems have to both conform to the demands of the emergency environment while integrating into how an organization works effectively in normal times. It has to foster the development of a culture that rises to the emergency challenge but fits with the day to day culture of decision making and communications – writ large.

Both departmental managers and emergency planners need to tackle some key elements that may be the difference between success and failure in the face of crisis:

I. **Simplicity:** the unfortunate, but understandable tendency in emergency planning is: the more serious, urgent and potentially dire the emergency scenario, the more complicated, and often obscure, the plan to respond to it becomes. The focus has to be on simplicity, and consistency with the systems and models that we use on a day to day basis.

Emergency planning has to be wired into normal functioning of the organization with a regular high level review of emergency communications and decision-making, mapping of how key relationships work and how they can be used in times of high stress.

II. **Infrastructure must focus on software not just hardware:** too often the hardware of emergency planning—the formal plan, equipment, and space is the focus of our efforts. The software of emergency management—the relationship building, the team building, etc.—is arguably just as important a fact that should be reflected in our approaches. A key element of this shift is to establish EPR as a management function, and not the domain of a group of specialised experts who often exist independently of the broader organisation.

III. **Designing Adaptability:** the challenge here is to find the balance between necessary formality and process, and necessary complications that can ensnare senior managers in too much process thereby reducing their thinking time. Strategies to do this will include working from existing decision-making processes, but stripping them down to meet the crisis challenge. Plans have to be created that ensure formal requirements are met. They also have to recognise, however, that senior officials need space and protection with clear communications channels to operate in a way that gets decisions made. They cannot be bound into a process foreign to them. Creating that space should be a prime objective of the planning process.

Adaptability cannot simply mean improvisation. Senior decision makers have to focus on the immediate matters at hand, but also the effective communication processes within their organisations to sustain response capacity—especially if the emergency continues. Sound processes for gathering, verifying, and sharing information are not only essential in ensuring sound choices are made, but that sound adaptation can occur over time.

The experience of Transport Canada during 9/11 was one of creative adaptation and success. The match between the effective use of the informal decision-making culture and the formal plans was not perfect. The good news is that one did not interfere with the other. In the long term, however, effective emergency response needs to better fit into the kind of adaptive needs we saw responded to in this case study. In the end, the notion of defective decision making has to be supplanted by a closer examination of how to use existing circuitry within an organization to get to effective decision-making during emergencies. Emergency planning models need to be part of the hardware of how departments manage, plan and act. The plan on the shelf is, well, on the shelf.

Andrew Graham is an Adjunct Professor in the School of Policy Studies, Queen's University. He was an Assistant Deputy Minister with the federal government for fifteen years. John Rainford is the Chief, Crisis Communications at Health Canada. He is a recent graduate of the Master's of Public Administration program at Queen's.