From Risk, to Issue, To Crisis: Is Your Program Prepared? [1, 2]

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As program and project managers, we are all raised on the idea of managing risks and issues. It is a part of our DNA to identify and manage risks, including developing mitigation plans to try to avoid the risk and developing contingency plans in case a risk is realized. We are also well versed in issue management—whether it is a realized risk or an unplanned event. We know that the success of our projects and programs is dependent on utilizing a structured risk and issue management processes. What about a crisis?

More importantly—what is a crisis? Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the word was abused in our society—not having coffee available in the morning was a crisis to some, or a question from senior leadership or oversight entities, or news coverage of your program was viewed as a crisis. Those things are simply events and not a crisis.

A crisis is "a catastrophic event, or series of escalating events, that threatens the strategic objectives, reputation, or viability of the program or its parent organization."

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[1] Second Editions are previously published papers that have continued relevance in today's project management world, or which were originally published in conference proceedings or in a language other than English. Original publication acknowledged; authors retain copyright. This paper was originally presented at the 7th Annual University of Maryland PM Symposium in May 2020. It is republished here with the permission of the author and conference organizers.

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While crisis management is related to risk and issue management, crisis management has its own set of international standards and best practices. Please note that crisis management is focused on how an _organization_ prepares for, manages, and is impacted by a crisis.

Good examples of a crisis include Hurricane Katrina and last year's Boeing 737 MAX airplane crashes, as well as the current COVID-19 pandemic.

What do these events share that make them a crisis? It is how these events affect the program or organization responsible for managing the program when:

- Objectives are not met.

- Reputation is severely damaged.

- Viability of the organization is threatened.

So what about your program? Do you need to consider crisis management? I would urge you to ask yourself: Do I have any risks that, if realized:

- Could jeopardize lives?

- Would break the law?

- Would jeopardize the reputation of the organization?

If you do, you should consider implementing a formal Crisis Management process.

On the 2020 Census Program, we recognized that we were carrying several risks that, if realized, could become a crisis. We also knew from previous censuses that something was going to go wrong and, depending on the timing, could become a crisis. In late 2018, we decided to establish a formal Crisis Management process. We worked with our contractor/partner Deloitte, who brought to the table a Certified Public Sector Continuity Professional (CPSCP) and a Business Continuity Professional (CBCP) to assist us in developing processes that are based on best practices.

So how does a crisis differ from business as usual?

- Business as usual means that information sources are of known quality, but in a crisis, information is incomplete.

- Under normal circumstances, past experiences (such as trusting your gut feeling) will help you, but in a crisis, you're in a completely new world and relying on instinct can make a bad situation worst.

- Normally, cause-and-effect decisions are predictable, but in a crisis, decisions are full of uncertainty.

- Under normal circumstances, you already have defined roles and expected actions to take, but in a crisis, the roles are fluid and actions may have never been done before.

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Maybe you are now realizing that your program needs formalized crisis management. Please know that crisis management does not replace existing response plans or duplicate processes such as your Continuity of Operations Plan (COOP). What it does is:

- Provide an overarching framework for managing a crisis.

- Document the process to anticipate, prepare, respond, and recover from a crisis.

- Identify existing response plans and describes the integration point with these plans.

The goal is not to develop a contingency plan for every potential scenario that could occur, but to develop plans for every potential impact. Meaning, you may be able to think of 500 different ways your staff could be prevented from working in your buildings and the 501st thing actually occurs. What is important is not that you identify the specific cause of the event, but that you have a plan for the affect.
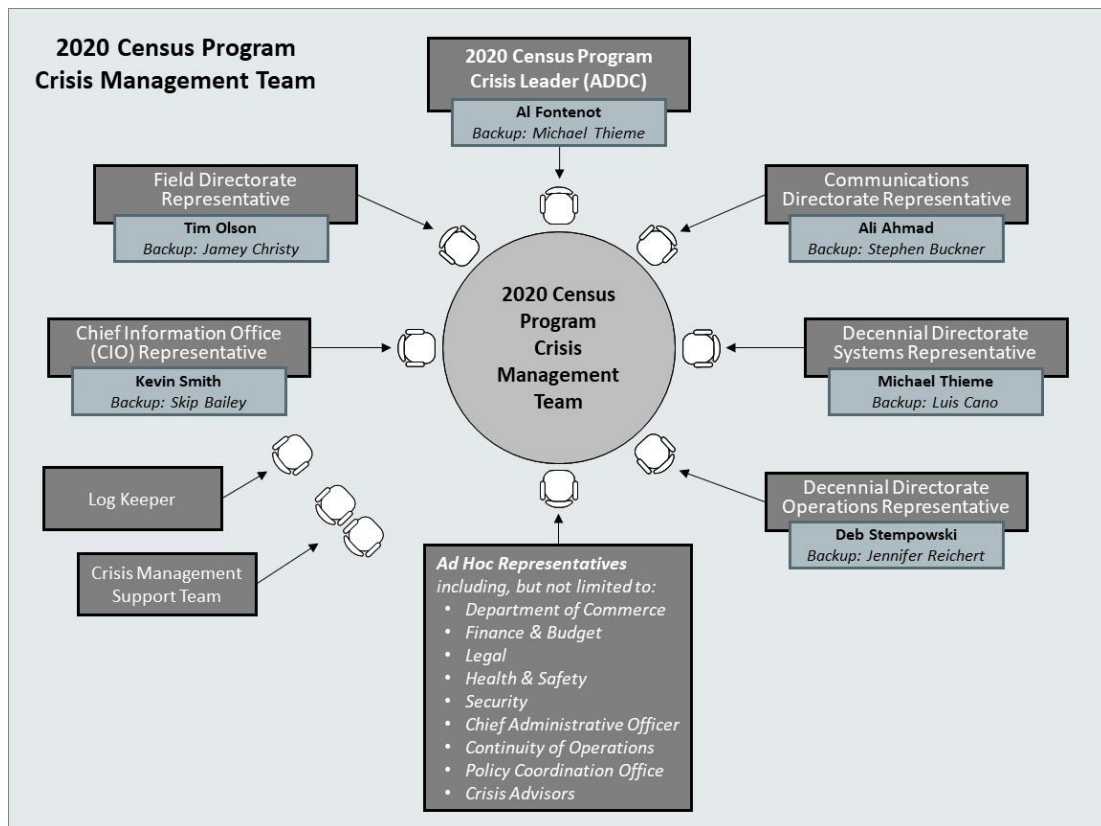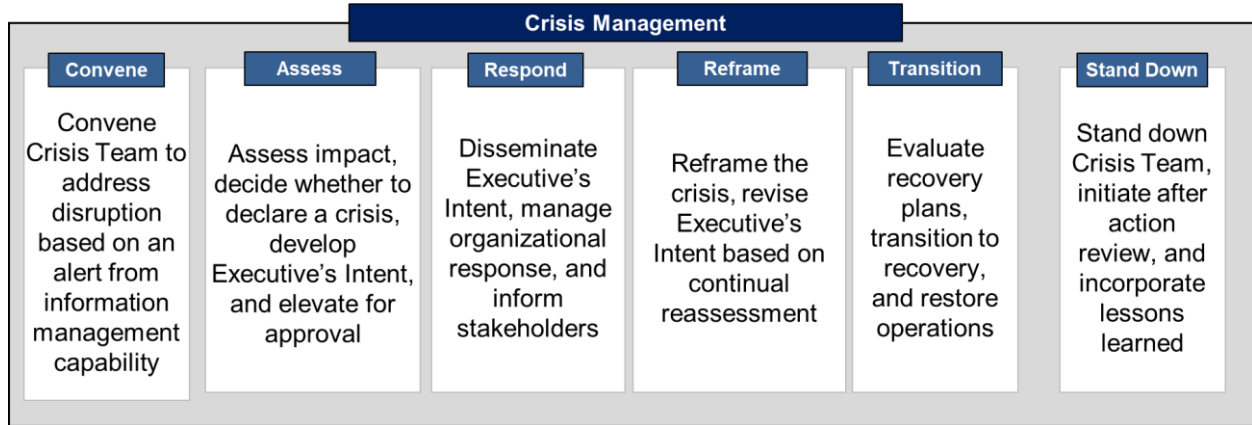

The chart above is a notional depiction of the Crisis Management Team for the 2020 Census including ad hoc representatives who are added to the team depending on the scope of the crisis.

The Crisis Management Team should generally be formed from the main body that provides strategic vision and has the authority to make decisions in a crisis. Additionally, people with the appropriate level of authority, experience, and capabilities should be appointed to this team. Beneath this team should be a hierarchy of teams, including both tactical and operational teams.

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To summarize, the Crisis Management Team is comprised of decision-makers, and the others who work for these people are the implementers.

Now I will walk through the major process steps for crisis management:

Crisis Management					
Convene	**Assess**	**Respond**	**Reframe**	**Transition**	**Stand Down**
Convene Crisis Team to address disruption based on an alert from information management capability	Assess impact, decide whether to declare a crisis, develop Executive's Intent, and elevate for approval	Disseminate Executive's Intent, manage organizational response, and inform stakeholders	Reframe the crisis, revise Executive's Intent based on continual reassessment	Evaluate recovery plans, transition to recovery, and restore operations	Stand down Crisis Team, initiate after action review, and incorporate lessons learned

The first step is to formally convene the Crisis Management Team. This occurs when an alert has come through your normal information management processes and systems and the Crisis Management Chair determines that the team needs to be convened.

Once the team is convened, the focus is on assessing the impact to decide whether the situation is indeed a crisis. If a crisis is declared, then the team must develop an executive intent. What is an executive intent? It is a high-level statement that is used to communicate to key stakeholders, employees, and potentially the public the goal of the program to address and recover from the crisis.

The executive intent is critical to crisis management because it is the prime directive (for you "Star Trek" fans) that guides all decision-making. It is so important that I'd like to spend a little time discussing executive intents.

The following are real world examples of an executive intent:

"It's our responsibility to eliminate this risk – we own it, and we know how to do it."

The first example came from the Boeing CEO during the 737 MAX airplane crashes in 2019.

"Be completely transparent during a cyber breach."

The second example came from the Home Depot CEO during a cybersecurity breach that occurred in 2017.

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"There will not be another attack on US soil."

Another example came from the FBI Director after 9/11. Relevant to this discussion, 2020 Census executive intent is shown below.

"[We will] not take actions that consciously contribute to the spread of the COVID-19 virus, while fulfilling our constitutional mandate to conduct a complete, accurate, and on-time Census."

Returning to the Crisis Management process, the next step for the Crisis Management Team is to respond to the crisis. That includes disseminating the executive's intent, managing organizational response to the crisis, and informing stakeholders. For the 2020 Census, stakeholders includes the Department of Commerce, Congress, the White House, and the public through news releases. In addition, during this step the frequency for follow-on meetings is set.

The Reframe step of Crisis Management is when you are actively managing the crisis. During this meeting, the Crisis Management Team will get updated information, reassess the circumstance, and potentially revise executive intent—crisis management is not just one meeting and then you are done. The crisis team uses these meetings to assess and evaluate recovery plans and make adjustments as needed. Any decisions made to redirect the program are disseminated through normal communications channels, including updates to the Risk and Issue Board, change requests submitted to the Change Control Board, and the continued dissemination of information to stakeholders that we discussed in the Assess Phase.

At some point, the crisis team begins to transition to recovery. The transition phases are underway once you are moving toward restoring operations or implementing the "new normal" for the program.

Finally, you cannot stay in crisis mode forever. The team does stand down, which also includes initiating an after-action review and lessons learned. It does not mean the event is over, just that we are moving forward under the "new normal." I also would like to highlight that from the very first meeting, a best practice is to discuss what the conditions for stand down will be and then revisit those in subsequent meetings. It is important for the Crisis Management Team to keep its eye on the end game so that everyone clearly understands when the crisis is over and life in the "new normal" begins.

The success of crisis management is highly dependent on conducting training exercises. If your program is critical enough to need crisis management, then you must plan and budget for exercises. Human nature always devolves to chaos in a crisis if you have not built in muscle memory. Therefore, it is crucial that you include all members of the organization who may be involved in a crisis and conduct exercises that increase in complexity from tabletop to scenarios in a scripted environment leading to interactive simulations.

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The more you exercise, the better the response will be in a real event.

The 2020 Census program conducted tabletop exercises beginning in May and going through September 2019. From November 2019 to February 2020, we held more complex scenarios that exercised all of the steps of crisis management. Our last exercise was held in late February, and our Crisis Management Team members all agreed that they would have benefited from more exercises.

Now let me begin by giving you an update on the status of the 2020 Census in terms of the COVID-19 pandemic.

- Prior to the start of operational activities, our risk register included a major disasters risk that covered everything from terrorism, hurricanes, earthquakes, and pandemics.

- On March 9, the Risk and Issue Board discussed establishing an issue regarding COVID-19.

- On March 10, Al Fontenot, the Census Bureau's Associate Director for Decennial Census Programs, convened the Crisis Management Team and declared a crisis. The next day the World Health Organization officially declared the novel coronavirus outbreak a pandemic.

- On March 12, mail began to be delivered inviting the public to self-respond to the census via the internet, phone, or through the mail. Those activities are ongoing and will continue throughout the data collection process. The good news is that currently more than 60 percent of households have responded to the census.

Guidance issued by the Office of Management and Budget and the Office of Personnel Management has given federal agencies guidelines to resume operations on an epidemiologically sound, data-driven basis, adhering to the latest federal, state, and local guidance. The Census Bureau continues to monitor the changing conditions at the state and local level, and it will update its planned start dates for selected operations and in selected states, consulting with appropriate officials.

Information provided daily to the Census Bureau from the Federal Emergency Management Agency, as well as state and local authorities, will be used to guide Census Bureau decisions on timing. As a result, selected field operations will resume on a phased schedule on a geographic basis.

Under the adjusted 2020 Census operational plan, the Census Bureau is conducting a series of preparatory activities so that we are fully ready to resume field activities as we continue to advance the mission of the 2020 Census to ensure a complete and accurate count. In-person activities, including enumeration, office work, and processing activities, will always incorporate the most current guidance from authorities to ensure the health and safety of staff and the public.

By law, the Census Bureau will deliver each state's population total, which determines its number of seats in the U.S. House of Representatives and the local counts each state needs to complete

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legislative redistricting. Because of the delays, for the first time since the 1790 Census, we will not deliver the data as originally scheduled.
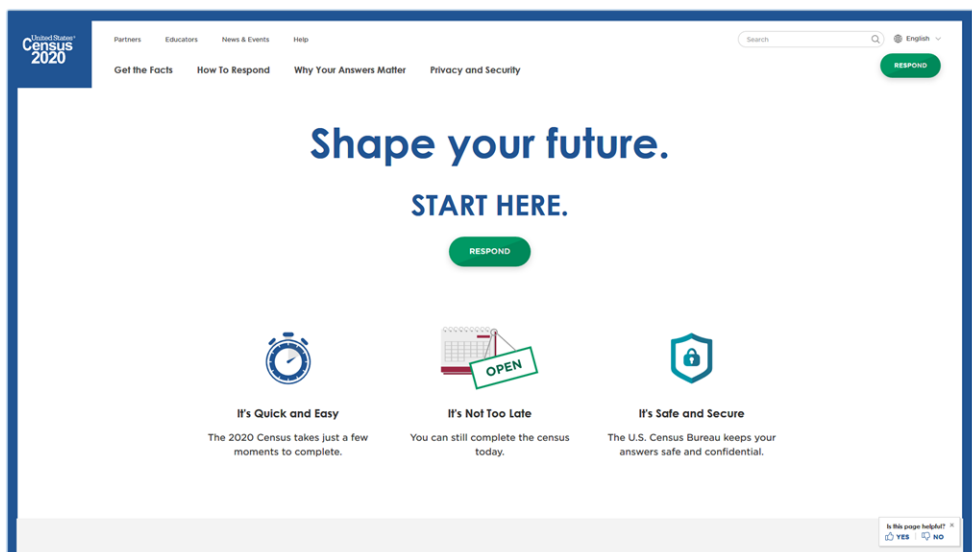
Deliver apportionment counts to the President

Planned Schedule	Revised Schedule
By December 31	By April 30, 2021

Deliver redistricting counts to states

Planned Schedule	Revised Schedule
By April 1, 2021	By July 31, 2021

The details of these decisions related to COVID-19 are shared publicly on the 2020census.gov website under News and Events, click on Press Kits. A quick public service announcement: if you have **not yet** responded, please do so through our website at 2020census.gov shown below.

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