Avoiding knee-jerk responses

ISARR's Senior Risk and Security Advisor, Andy Blackwell, examines the challenges knee-jerk responses pose to managing risk and gives practical advice on how to avoid them.
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This quote from Airborne Law Enforcement’s Safety Wire publication back in July 2014 provides us with a simple description of the long-standing challenge of knee-jerk responses to incidents. Despite the responses invariably being well intentioned, these hasty actions usually lead to ineffective rules and procedures. Whilst the article was focused on safety management, it has much relevance to security and the management of disruptive events. The number of knee-jerk responses resulting from efforts to counter terrorism, combat deadly pandemics, and maintain the integrity of aviation safety and security is high. The challenge of knee-jerk reactions goes way beyond incident management and emergency response, it can impact all areas of personal and organisational decision making, and be aggravated by groupthink.

Knee-jerk reactions are not the same as gut feelings. Gut feelings are based on the unconscious matching of current events to past experiences, whilst knee-jerk reactions are usually triggered by our emotions, such as anger or anxiety, based on the present situation.
Let’s take a look at some examples:

**PERSONAL PROTECTION**

The tragic killing of Sir David Amess in a terrorist act has led to calls for better personal protection of MPs. Many of the so-called solutions cited in the media were not credible, would be unworkable and showed a lack of understanding of risk management, policing resources and practices, particularly personal protection protocols. Those making these hasty suggestions were no doubt well intentioned - and clearly there are some immediate risks to be mitigated - but nothing can replace a considered decision that is based on facts and reality as opposed to one emerging from fear, emotion and time pressures. Managing risk properly requires careful and diverse thought, with measured and proportionate responses.

**AIRCRAFT COCKPIT SAFETY**

Philip Baum, a leading aviation security expert, condemned the rules on aircraft cockpit access as a ‘knee-jerk response to the 9/11 terrorist attacks’, which enabled Andreas Lubitz, the Germanwings co-pilot, to commit the mass murder of 149 other people on Flight 4U9525 on 24th March 2015. Carolyn McCall, the CEO of Easyjet, was also quoted as saying “Knee-jerk reactions, not a good idea”. An ongoing challenge raised by Baum was the imbalance between the drive to detect prohibited items at airport security checkpoints and the need to identify persons with negative intent.

**THE GLOBAL PANDEMIC**

Many of the responses to the global pandemic have been labelled as knee-jerk reactions as governments around the world grapple with balancing health protection and public safety measures with the need to ensure economic stability. The futility of knee-jerk responses was highlighted by Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau who said that “Canada won’t ban foreign travellers arriving from countries grappling with COVID-19 outbreaks”. He went on to say that “knee-jerk reactions won’t help to stop the spread of the virus”. Canada’s approach to tackling the pandemic differs from the protocols adopted by some of their closest allies.
F1 SAFETY

Former British racing driver David Coulthard recently voiced concerns that a “knee-jerk” reaction to the death of marshal Graham Beveridge at the Australian Grand Prix would not be good for the sport. Coulthard is worried that people are becoming too concerned over the increased speeds in Formula One, and believes the FIA must not instigate big rule changes before ensuring they are needed. He went on record to say that ‘reductions in speed would not have made a difference in the accident’, and is concerned that the regulation changes have actually increased the potential for such incidents.

CHILD ABUSE IN THE US

Those tackling child abuse in the United States have also publicly aired their concerns that knee-jerk approaches to child protection are not putting children first - a point raised by Richard Wexler, executive director of the National Coalition for Child Protection Reform, after studies revealed that forever increasing the child welfare surveillance state rarely works. Best practice approaches in New York City were focused on tackling family poverty, which, according to Wexler, is often mistaken for child neglect. Research during the pandemic also revealed that getting families the help they need to thrive was more beneficial than the traditional ‘surveillance’ approach. Wexler explained that ‘the pandemic forced the city’s child welfare agency to step back, and communities stepped up. They formed mutual aid organisations providing everything from food and diapers to childcare and counselling and, because the people running those groups were not mandated reporters, families in need did not have to fear asking them for help’. Wexler cautioned that foster care itself is no guarantee of safety, with study after study having found evidence of abuse in one-quarter to one-third of foster homes, with the rate in group homes and institutions being even worse. As child abuse deaths increased in Pennsylvania, but reduced in New York City, Wexler called upon Pennsylvania to refuse to accept the usual knee-jerk response and truly put children first.
The initial response to a disruptive event is the most important one, as it has the greatest scope for making things better or, unfortunately, making things worse.

It is not unusual for such responses to be seen as ‘excessive’ as organisations grapple to get the situation stabilised and prevent it becoming a crisis, but then comes the really difficult part - finding a longer-term workable solution and being able to safely scale back the initial response into a sustainable and resilient plan.

With hindsight, what might initially be considered a knee-jerk response could simply be someone doing what made sense to them based on their knowledge and understanding of the situation, and their focus at that particular moment in time. We all take actions within the context of what makes sense to us, and this includes tactical and strategic decision making. This ‘Local Rationality’ principle makes it more difficult for humans to take actions that do not make sense to us, particularly if we are missing the context, understanding and knowledge that might give sense to the action.

Eurocontrol’s Skybrary provides us with useful guidance in relation to analysis of decision making. A starting point when investigating why a particular course of action was chosen should be to accept that the decision made sense to the decision maker at the time, and then seek to understand the local rationality - why was the decision "locally rational"? There may be numerous factors and combinations of factors. If you establish which factors are at play in a decision before you try to change a person’s behaviour, then you will be much more successful at creating sustained change.
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<tr>
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<th>Reason</th>
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<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Lack of situational awareness</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>Overwhelming desire to be seen to be taking action without giving sufficient thought to how appropriate their response will be</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>Naive risk mindset - the ‘that couldn't happen here’ syndrome, then when it does the organisation is ill prepared and ‘knee-jerks’</td>
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<td>Reactive rather than proactive response to managing threats and risk</td>
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<td>5</td>
<td>Lack of robust policies and procedures</td>
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<td>6</td>
<td>Poor leadership and lack of trained and experienced personnel</td>
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<td>7</td>
<td>Poor operational learning, lessons identified don't become lessons learned, therefore the same mistakes are repeated.</td>
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<td>8</td>
<td>Inappropriate training and exercising, does it really pressure test your emergency responders and crisis management team, or has it become a tick box exercise?</td>
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<td>9</td>
<td>Information management challenges such as the lack of a knowledge repository</td>
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<td>10</td>
<td>Lack of diversity of thought, decision makers are blinded by 'groupthink'</td>
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<td>11</td>
<td>Poor organisational culture resulting in emotional triggers such as anger or anxiety</td>
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The secret to managing your knee-jerk reactions is learning to act instead of react—no matter how difficult the circumstances...

The above quote comes from a blog article in Psychology Today by Bryan Robinson, Professor Emeritus at the University of North Carolina. In Arup Fire’s presentation regarding tall buildings and the events of 9/11, the authors highlight the importance of reacting to lessons learned, but not to overreact.

The ability to be able to take positive action rather than just over-reacting and risking worsening the situation will invariably depend on the skills and experience of the organisation’s incident commanders and crisis team. A skilled commander will be alert for warning signs of groupthink. Below we discuss some vital yet basic rules organisations can follow to avoid groupthink and make informed, rather than knee-jerk, decisions.
The need for decision makers to be sceptical is paramount. Discussions about threat, risk and response need to be completely uninhibited and the ‘follow the leader’ type culture - where people are reluctant to challenge the opinions of the leader - or the majority view creates an environment where knee-jerk reactions and other poor decision making can flourish. I have strong recollections of being in a high level safety and security review board meeting when the Accountable Manager suggested an approach that, in my, view certainly wasn't the most appropriate. Almost without exception the members of the group followed his lead. I challenged the view, argued my point, and the Accountable Manager, to his credit, changed his stance, as did all the other members present! The need for risk managers and decision makers to feel comfortable challenging the views of others, however senior, in a constructive manner will make for more robust decision making.

Establishing different groups to work on alternative solutions is a sound way of ensuring diversity of thought, and eliminating groupthink. Each group would be tasked to present their options to the other groups and share ideas. Working up these options away from the CEO and his leadership team encourages free thinking and prevents more junior staff, who may have the perfect solution, being swayed by what the most senior person believes is the correct course of action.

What we can learn from the Emergency Services

The fast-paced and emotionally charged environment our Emergency Services personnel operate in provides us with valuable insights into effective decision-making in the most challenging of circumstances. The use of decision controls in multi-agency environments are set out in the Joint Emergency Services Interoperability Principles, which include the use of decision control techniques and, whilst designed for emergency service use, can easily be adapted for businesses and other organisations.

The quality of decision making, particularly during significant disruptive events and crises, depends on the responding organisations having personnel with specific leadership skills. ISARR's Crisis Leadership article by Russ Huxtable takes a “deep dive” into leadership. It looks at the qualities and skills required to lead an organisation through a crisis and explores how to prepare leaders for this role.
The impacts of the pandemic, global warming and the enduring threat from terrorism and organised crime, including cyber-attacks, all pose significant challenges to security and resilience professionals. Many of these professionals have been at the forefront of supporting the general public, employees and businesses in a myriad of ways during the pandemic and its aftermath. Duties range from the more specialist roles such as business continuity, emergency planning, intelligence analysis, threat assessment and travel risk management, to the more conventional but vital protective security activities.

A recent study by the consulting company, McKinsey entitled ‘Great Attrition’ or ‘Great Attraction’? The choice is yours, examined why companies were struggling to address the record number of employees who are quitting or thinking about doing so. The paper concludes that ‘Organisations that take the time to learn why—and act thoughtfully—will have an edge in attracting and retaining talent’. The same philosophy applies to security and resilience, and retaining skilled and experienced ‘specialist’ personnel is key. In addition, acting thoughtfully, using foresight from hindsight, together with effective planning and decision making will create highly resilient organisations with a competitive edge.

Information about lessons identified from previous disruptive events should be readily accessible, but rarely is as organisations get into a destructive cycle of just firefighting as opposed to fire prevention. There will always be a need for initial ‘firefighting’ - and crisis plans invariably fail on first contact with the ‘enemy’ - but having a way of looking at similar incidents managed by your organisation and the learning identified from them, together with a broader search about the learning from other organisations, will enable risk managers to develop effective emergency response strategies and robust risk solutions, whilst not repeating the mistakes of others.

Organisations that avoid knee-jerk responses are likely to be safer, more resilient, and gain competitive advantage.

On face value this seems a fairly straightforward practice, but in reality this is challenging as most organisations don’t have the means of rapidly identifying previous lessons identified and progress made in terms of implementation, with such information often being deeply buried in company quality management systems that do not always lend themselves to rapid search and retrieval. Whilst the data might be discussed during the organisation’s risk assessment reviews, in most cases the key ‘information’ nuggets aren’t available as prompts or warnings to those charged with dynamically responding to disruptive events. Addressing this challenge creates the greatest opportunity for organisations to make the step change from being reactive in their approach to managing disruptive events, to a more agile and proactive stance that eliminates knee-jerk reactions.
CONCLUSION

From managing deadly pandemics and preventing child abuse, to maintaining aviation security and keeping motor racing safe, the common feature of the knee-jerk response to disruptive event management is that far from solving problems, the practice introduces new risks and, more often than not, worsens the situation.

Getting the longer-term solution ‘right first time’, requires diversity of thought, ready access to relevant information, and a measured approach based on sound decision control techniques. Key to this is ensuring that competent, experienced and ‘battle-hardened’ staff lead the response, supported by proven software platforms, tools and systems.

Thoughtful approaches will always yield more productive outcomes than simply using a sledgehammer to crack a nut in a bid to satisfy an impulsive desire to act quickly under pressure.
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Great attrition or great attraction? The choice is yours

The heat of the moment - life and death decision making from a firefighter, Dr Sabrina Cohen-Hatto

The secret tool to manage your knee jerk reactions

Blinded by ‘groupthink’ – why does it keep happening (and is there anything we can do to stop it)?

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About ISARR

ISARR provides bespoke risk, resilience and security management solutions. The ISARR software platform consists of interconnected modules that support both routine operations and seamless escalation into crisis management.

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