

Creating a Safety Net

PMM5 Postscript™ Number 50

Background Information: In *Professional Meeting Management*®, fifth edition, Chapter 44 looks at risk management. In that chapter, Risk Planning and Emergency Management, author Tyra Hilliard helps meeting managers:

- Assess the risks for a meeting, facility or organization
- Analyze the risk for a meeting, facility or organization
- Distinguish between the concepts of risk, emergency crisis, disaster and business continuity and how each may manifest itself differently
- Apply the risk management model to create a specific risk management plan
- Evaluate existing risk management planned and tools to improve them in the future

PMM5 Postscriptä Use: This PMM5 Postscript™ focuses on emergency and crisis management. It explores the concept of risk assessment and examines the elements found in a risk management policy. This PMM5 Postscript™ also includes additional group discussion or research projects to supplement the PMM5 chapter.

Learner Outcomes: At the completion of this reading, you should be able to:

- List at least twelve types of risk inherent in meetings and events.
- Identify the seven steps in any risk management planning.
- List methods of risk management.
- Identify other ways to mitigate risk outside of emergency and crisis planning.

Related PMM5 Chapter: Chapter 44, Risk Planning and Emergency Management
Author: Tyra Hilliard, JD, CMP



Risk Exists

In the world of meetings and events, it doesn't have to be "your" crisis to be disruptive. Consider these actual happenings and their potential impacts:

- More than one-hundred participants at a health-care conference fall ill with a food-borne illness; it makes headlines in the local papers and on Internet news sites.
- Protestors rush the doors on the opening day of a national conference and set up a sit-down protest in the main lobby/registration area, resulting in nine arrests and a lot of media attention.
- Flooding takes out the total phone system.
- An employee of a "secure" payment site vendor steals credit card numbers from association members purchasing books online. The meeting manager learns of the crime when members complain.
- During a meeting, a fire breaks out in the building. Many of the attendees are not employees and have no idea where the fire exits are; three attendees are injured.

Despite these actual events, many meeting managers don't create risk management plans. According to the 2007 Meeting Market Trends Survey, most meeting managers across all segments of the industry have no basic emergency/contingency plan for their meetings and event (Hill, 2007).

Tyra Hilliard, CMP, is quoted in another source: "Too many planners assume safety and security is someone else's responsibility; often the hotels. The planner has to be the one to initiate a risk assessment and contingency plan for a meeting, even if they don't write it. They need to be involved in the process" (Hall, 2007, p. 30).

The PCMA Foundation and the Industry Issues Committee conducted a survey in July 2006 about crisis planning. Of 400 meeting planners who responded (PCMA Report Crisis Planning, 2006):

- 39.3 percent felt prepared
- 37.8 percent said they were not very prepared
- 65.6 percent said that having a plan is very or extremely important
- 41.5 percent have a plan in place
- 49.3 percent reported that their organization does not have a crisis management team

Meeting managers have the opportunity to learn from the Chinese proverb "Preparedness prevents peril" and this PMM Postscript™ will help them operate meetings and event with the appropriate safety net.

Defining Risk

The terms *risk*, *emergency*, *crisis*, and *disaster* are often used interchangeably. Hilliard defines them as follows (Hilliard, 2006, p. 672):

Risk — The potential for exposure to loss or the possibility that something may happen that will adversely affect the meeting

Emergency — Unexpected actual or impending situation that may cause injury, loss of life, destruction of property or cause interference, loss or disruption of an organization's normal business operations.

Crisis — A critical event, which if not handled appropriately may dramatically impact an organization's profitability, reputation or ability to operate

Disaster — Sudden, unplanned calamitous event causing great damage or loss or any event that creates an inability on an organization's part to provide critical business functions

In this PMM5 Postscript™ *risks, emergencies, crises and disasters* will generally be termed *disruptions*.

The Shape of Risk

Hilliard classifies risk as internal and external. She reinforces that specific meetings carry their own form of risk. Examples include program risk, attendee risk, destination risk and facility risk. To further amplify, meeting managers must be aware of multiple risks associated with meetings including:

- Weather (blizzards, hurricanes, tornados or other natural disasters)
- Disease (pandemics or epidemics)
- Labor (hotel strikes, transportation, work stoppages)
- Violence (terrorism, bomb threats)
- Infrastructure (structural, transportation, electricity, other utilities)
- Financial (hotel bankruptcies)
- Personnel (sickness, death or resignation of key people, key suppliers)
- Information (data housed in databases, on personal computers, or on paper documents)
- On-site (contamination, fire, lockdown)
- Public Relations (rumors, slander, tampering, loss of credibility)
- Physical losses (use of facilities, loss of supplies or equipment, breakdowns,
- Fraud (financial, uninvited attendees)
- Bad timing (another event impacts you)
- Ancillary (protests outside your hotel about another group in the same space)
- Third Party (lack of insurance)

Risk Management

The basic tools of risk management include (Wickrema, 2005):

- Loss prevention
- Loss control
- Insurance
- Emergency/Crisis management

Hilliard identifies other ways that meeting managers can manage risk including (Hilliard, 2006, pp. 677-681):

- Information
- Site inspection
- Security
- Exhibit security

- Badges
- Contracts
- Insurance

This PMM5 Postscript™ explores details about emergency and crisis management.

Which Risks are Risky

Meeting managers must identify on a meeting by meeting basis which risks are worth planning for and which are not. To do that Bob Mellinger, President of Attainium, a firm providing business continuity, emergency preparedness and crisis management services, explains:

"Risk = Probability + Consequence. This is just a fancy way of saying that risk is the combination of the probability that something is likely to happen and the potential impact if it does. The risks on which meeting managers want to concentrate are those in which both the likelihood of occurrence and the potential consequences are in the medium to high range. For example, a meteorite could hit an event facility, but, while the consequences of such a happening would be huge, the probability of it is quite small. This would not be an event worth planning for. Any likely disruption with a consequence of potential critical injury or loss of life must take precedence over less critical outcomes. It's important, therefore, to prioritize the risks as well as identifying the ones to focus on" (Mellinger).

Seven Steps in Emergency and Crisis Planning

There are seven steps in any risk management planning in the event of an emergency, crisis or disaster:

1. **Assess the meeting risks** — These risks should not be operational glitches but risks of disastrous proportions. Does the meeting have any special risks or conditions?
2. **Determine acceptable outcomes** — Play out the “*what if*” scenarios to determine acceptable outcomes. Develop likely scenarios that may occur. Mentally walk through every aspect of the event and try to image every possible accident or cause for concern.
3. **Work with your partners** — Work with partners on strategies for:
 - Emergency medical response
 - Emergency communications
 - Building security and access

Vendors and partners may have specific procedures or protocols that are followed should any problem arise.

4. **Determine contingency operations** — For each risk, draw up contingency operations, procedures and communication strategies. A risk management plan does not address all risks; it only addresses those that the organization feels are most likely. Bruce Schneier, a security technologist states “Planning is effective when things are likely to happen – you plan for contingencies and eventualities. You don’t plan for bizarrely impossible things” (Boisclair, 2006).

5. **Write policies for special situations** — Plan ahead with refund policies, travel policies for stranded participants, or other special situations.
6. **Communicate and test** — The best plan may not work if it is not communicated. Additionally, the plan should be tested and people trained in executing the plan in an emergency. Learn from examples of fire drills. People have learned how to respond to a fire alarm through fire drills. Meeting managers should develop the same attitude about risk management and business continuity plans.
7. **Evaluate** — After a meeting is over, assess how well the plan worked or would have worked. Gather needed data to assess the success of the plan.

Sample Emergency and Crisis Plan Checklist

A risk management plan should be as short **and** as complete as possible. An overly complicated and cumbersome document will not help anyone during an emergency. Many risk management plans include the following sections:

- Objective
- Distribution
- Policy Statement
- Meeting/event overview
- Identification of contacts
- Decision makers and roles
- List of venues
- Timeline of events
- Credentialing process
- Emergency response procedures for specific types of emergencies
 - Natural disaster
 - Human-caused occurrences
 - Business continuity
- Law enforcement and security information
- Communication system
- Media list
- Maps

While risk management plans can follow a similar format, each meeting and event requires a specific risk assessment and plan. Plan on updating the plan (don't use the same plan year after year for an association annual meeting) and practice the plan (like a fire drill).

Making it Work

Creating an emergency and crisis plan is only the start. Add these tips to create a viable, working safety net:

- **Start with the contract** — Good contract language addresses the consequences of potential catastrophes and details a process of handling. Be specific in contract language. Consider wording the force majeure clause to include a lesser standard of commercial impracticability and frustration of purpose of the contract. Also require that the force majeure clause be broader in scope to provide for partial termination of performance as well as total

termination of performance (Foster, 2005). Finally in the force majeure clause, define as a reason to reduce liability any advisory given by a government or agency of the government that all travel, or travel to a specific location, is not advised. Include in a cancellation clause all possible reasons that an event might not be held (Howe, 2006).

- **Don't substitute insurance for a disaster plan** — Meeting cancellation insurance eases financial losses after a disaster but is not a replacement for a solid risk management plan.
- **Put people first in planning** — The safety and welfare of the people is the first concern in planning, in communication and in dealing with the press.
- **Assess the group** — Different groups will respond in different ways to potential difficulties. Assess the group and determine the optimal way (and person) to communicate instructions.
- **Assess the entire scene** — A meeting does not occur in isolation. Consider any risks because of where or when the meeting occurs or even other groups on site or in vicinity.
- **Identify decision makers** — Identify the decision makers. Clarify who will do what, especially considering the roles of local authorities, building security, emergency medical teams, etc. Select leaders of the risk management team who can remain calm and focused. People in the spotlight during a crisis must act calmly and move quickly. They should provide as much information as possible in a humane, hopeful and compassionate manner.
- **Make trade-offs** — Balance risks with other trade-offs for the specific meeting. For example, are stricter registration procedures warranted and how will the group respond.
- **Focus on mitigation** — Mitigation is everything done to prevent a disruption from occurring or to minimize its impact. It's keeping virus protection updated, for example, to prevent data loss from a new virus. Mitigation is planning early and carefully for security at the event. It's having a backup plan in case the registration system goes down an hour before registration opens. Finally, mitigation entails having a complete list of contact phone numbers so a meeting manager can reach anyone on the event staff or anyone else necessary at any time of the day or night if something comes up.
- **Carry it** — A crisis is no time to be searching for details and procedures and phone number; always keep a copy of the risk management plan handy at all times.
- **Assemble copies** — Maintain extra copies of essential documents (in a separate location or separate luggage) to ensure accessibility.
- **Plan for communication disruption** — Don't count on regular communications channels during a crisis. Consider scenarios where cell phones will not work.

(Many tips taken from Frank Mauloff's article, Meetings on the Hire Wire, 2004.)

Partner Up

It's not clear why many meeting managers don't focus on risk management issues. They may be expecting to "wing it" or playing the odds that nothing will happen. Meeting managers may not enjoy planning for unpleasant events or may lack the time for this type of planning.

Time is always a constraint in planning and meeting managers can minimize the time required for risk management by working with vendors and suppliers. Many vendors will have their own emergency plans. Review their plans to integrate them into the planning process.

Assess the contingency plans for:

- Hotels/buildings
- Convention centers
- Travel agencies or in-house travel departments
- Third-party supplies

Don't forget to include internal people as partners. Many travel managers have contingency plans in place to determine where staff is traveling.

Partners can help with:

- Emergency medical response
- Emergency communication when in the building
- Building security and access
- Evacuations, sheltering and lockdowns
- Protests
- Media response

Include security as an issue during a site visit and later during the pre-con, or pre-conference meeting. Meeting managers can then integrate that information into their own advance planning.

Meeting manager can also build from existing risk management procedures that are available. For example, Freeman, a producer of expositions, conventions, corporate events and exhibits has written a planning guide to help protect its business interests in the face of a pandemic flue. The document is available at the International Association of Expositions and Events Web site at www.iaee.com. The document charts responsibilities for various company departments before and during a crisis.

Or Microbix has created a pandemic response plan for large businesses/organizations. It is available at <http://www.microbix.com/15.html>.

Websites and Resources

Meeting managers can rely on these risk management resources:

Center for Disease Control — www.cdc.gov

World Health Organization — www.who.int/ent/

Federal Emergency Management Agency — www.fema.gov

US Department of Homeland Security — www.ready.gov

White Office of Homeland Security — www.whitehouse.gov/homeland

Depart of State: Overseas Security Advisory Council — www.ds-osac.org

National Weather Service — www.nws.noaa.gov

Summary

A myriad of things can go wrong at a meeting. From a simple twisted ankle to a natural disaster many of types of risks exist at meetings. Any time people are gathered, meeting managers would do well to focus on risk management—to prevent injuries or the loss of lives, as well as to maintain their organization's reputation.

Risk management involves identifying potential disruptions, planning a response to the disruption and confronting and resolving the disruption. A risk management plan minimizes confusion, disruption and could save lives. While developing a risk management plan seems like a daunting task, it is actually a common-sense document that will focus on mitigation and prevention, preparedness, response and recovery. Good risk management planning facilitates a rapid, coordinated and effective response when a disruption of any type occurs.

Group Projects

1. What type of information should a meeting manager collect from attendees? What other groups (besides attendees) is it important to collect emergency data for?
2. From a risk assessment perspective, what items should a meeting manager include on a site inspection checklist when looking at a hotel?
3. Select one of the following crises and formulate questions to ask or issues to investigate related to the specific type of emergency:
 - Natural disasters
 - Power outages
 - Fires
 - Structural fires
 - Strikes
 - Demonstrations
 - Bad timing

For example, if you select fires, during a site inspection note fire exists, fire extinguishers.

4. How can a meeting manager gather intelligence about a specific geographic area to determine risk? What information should they focus on gathering?

5. How should a meeting manager react if they were alerted to a bomb threat? Consider a scenario in which a meeting manager is told at 1 pm on the opening day of the conference that a bomb threat has been called in to the facility. The conference is scheduled to begin at 2 pm. Prior planning with the facility has indicated it will take 35 minutes to evacuate the building.

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