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BADLY SHAKEN, DEEPLY STIRRED. LIFE AT THE MUSEUM AFTER A DISASTER

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In 2000, the National Museum of Coins and Medals experienced the first armed robbery ever to take place in daylight at a museum in the Netherlands. This paper describes what happened immediately after the event.

It focuses on the urgent needs of the various groups which are inevitably involved in the follow-up: the museum staff, the officials and trustees, the police and the press. We found out that the first few hours after the robbery are of crucial importance to how - much, much later - matters are finally resolved. Most museum emergency plans seem to stop right at the moment when a disaster has actually happened. This is why this report of our experiences might be useful to our colleagues.

Introduction

At around four o'clock on 19th April 2000, a man succeeded in stealing a unique five-kilo gold bar from our museum exhibition. It was the only piece remaining from the many thousands of similar pieces that the Dutch East India Company had sent to Asia in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

Immediately after the theft, the alarm systems went off. A member of staff was witness to the crime; four other members of staff tried to stop the thief near the entrance. However, he was armed with pepper spray, which he used to disable the guards by spraying it into their eyes. He escaped in a car, becoming the first person in the Netherlands ever to carry out an armed robbery of a Dutch museum in the daytime.

Before the robbery, museum security had been very high. We had steel cases with plastic-coated glass almost two centimetres thick, plus various electronic devices, cameras, and a professional team of guards. None of this was enough to prevent the crime from taking place.

Though we were not aware of it at the time - at first we were mainly concerned with the immediate aftermath - the first few hours after the event were of crucial importance. Luckily, we did not make any grave mistakes, but in retrospect I am very aware that we were helped by beginner's luck.

In hindsight, the trick is to remain in charge of the situation - all when the situation seems to be trying hard to take charge of you. In other words: it is extremely important to try, as soon as possible, to regain the initiative that disaster has snatched from you. I am convinced that it is an essential investment for all of us to spend time adding an extra chapter to our

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museums' emergency plans, i.e. a chapter dealing with the situation that follows any disaster. For, quite simply, at the moment itself, no one has the time to think carefully about the measures one should take!

Very little information seems to be available in the museum world about post-robbery experiences. Most of us will have put a lot of energy into prevention schemes and emergency planning. But somehow, when it comes to envisaging the moments that might follow a truly awful occurrence, our imaginations seem to grind to a halt. All that careful planning, all those safety measures, all that staff training: do all of those reassuring strategies for preventing an accident contain some kind of psychological mechanism that stop us from confronting the merest thought of a possible worst-case scenario? Or is it just that you have to set priorities in the busy day-to day practice of life?

It seems most logical to approach the subject by identifying the various groups of people who will be involved. In our case these were:

- The museum staff
- The police
- The officials and the Board of Trustees
- The press

The Museum Staff

After the event, members of staff were, of course, highly emotional. Some of them cried (and not only women cry), others started shouting, some were simply speechless, and others went off to a nearby pavement cafe to have a cup of coffee.

In such a situation, it turns out that there are heroes and cowards, leaders and followers. This division does not necessarily take place according to the usual museum hierarchy, or according to the emergency plan. Before an event like this really happens it is very difficult to predict the reactions of different members of staff. So it is important to leave flexibility in the plans, flexibility that will help you and them to adapt to the actual situation.

First of all, it was very important to get a clear idea of what had happened. In our case, this came in a statement from the head of security, who was one of the persons who had tried to stop the thief. Also present at this improvised meeting were the heads of communications and collections. What we did *not do* at this juncture was instruct all members of staff to come together, for at least two hours, in a single area where they would be comfortable. In retrospect, there would have been at least three good reasons for such a measure:

- It is very important that everybody receives the same information at the same time.

- It makes it more convenient for planning emergency meetings with the right people, and to distribute the coming workload as well as possible.
- Isolation makes it impossible for the press to gather statements from unauthorised members of staff.

Three hours after the robbery we had organised a meeting between all the people involved, and a psychologist specialised in channelling emotions after traumatic experiences. This person came from a professional organisation that operates on behalf of the most frequent victims of raids - mainly banks, supermarkets and gas stations. I cannot sufficiently stress the importance of this measure in preventing later psychological problems.

While their counselling technique is simple, it is - as far as I can estimate - extremely effective. Everybody present is asked to relate exactly what happened, from their own perspective and with as many details as possible. This clearly created a bond between those present who were willing to share their experiences. Of course, there are people who don't want to share, and they can't be forced. In some cases they will find other people to listen to their story.

After this exchange of information, the psychologist described the various phases which most people go through after a traumatic experience. There are a number of common phenomena, such as feelings of extreme vulnerability and anxiety, both at home and at work; sleeplessness; "replaying the film a thousand times"; and an extreme alertness to their surroundings. People were also recommended to ask family members to help them process their experience by listening to their stories as many times as necessary.

Over the next few weeks, there were four more meetings, which were attended by most of the people involved. The participants then concluded that further meetings were unnecessary. A separate meeting, chaired by the same counsellors, was organised for colleagues who had not been directly involved in the robbery, but who nonetheless felt a great sense of loss and insecurity. It helped them a great deal to share their emotions in a structured way and to exchange every bit of available information.

The nature of the emotions involved deserves some attention. In this particular case, there were two principal feelings:

- The feelings of the guards involved. Though trained to prevent robbery, they had failed in their job, and felt extremely guilty. Even the man who sold a ticket to the robber experienced a great sense of guilt. He had noticed that the man wore a wig and looked "strange", but had not thought it was necessary to inform the guards.
- The more general feeling of "museum professionalism", which was shared by the rest of the staff. Museum staff are trained to safeguard objects for future generations. A robbery is an attack on the essence

of what museums are about, and therefore mocks this professionalism in the crudest possible way. And on top of this come the many "jokes" by well-intentioned friends and by other people who have no idea of the painful associations.

The first three months after the robbery was a period of many incidents in the museum. Many suspicious visitors were followed by the guards. At one point, one of the witnesses of the crime was sure she recognised the robber in one of the visitors. The police were called to take him to the police station to give a statement. It proved to be false alarm. In November - six months after the robbery - we organised a short meeting to establish a formal end to this period of mourning and anxiety. The two basic messages of this ceremony were that the gold bar was not going to come back, and that we had done all that we could to protect it.

Our final acceptance of the robbery came when, some months later, we opened an exciting new exhibition on the subject of gold. Though this had been planned a long time before, our reaction immediately after the robbery had been to postpone it for several years. In retrospect, it was very good that we decided to pursue our original plan. When the guards had got over their first somewhat nervous days, the running of the museum finally returned to normal.

The Police

The police were informed one minute after the robbery had taken place, when the raider was still in the museum. When policemen in the Netherlands are called to a robbery, they have strict instructions to park their cars and to put on their bullet-proof vests before they proceed to the scene of the crime. Needless to say, when they arrived only a few minutes later, the thief had already fled.

Thanks to one of the guards who had noted the number on the licence plate, the getaway car was found, not far from the museum, within fifteen minutes. Empty, of course. It turned out that it had been stolen two days earlier in Amsterdam.

The police team immediately started their investigations: trying to find fingerprints at the scene of the crime, and taking statements from the guards, who were dazed by pepper spray and by events in general. The staff's clothing was immediately required for detailed research on the content of the pepper spray and for possible hairs or small flakes of skin. The clothes were returned only after a year, partly destroyed in the police laboratory.

Since no one in the museum had any experience of dealing with the police in such a crisis, the policemen could do more or less as they pleased. For example we, the museum staff, were denied entrance to the exhibition room!

It soon turned out that the police were appalled by the amateurishness of our conduct immediately after the robbery. In order to leave as many traces as possible, we should have sealed off the room straight after the robbery. They were also unhappy that the museum did not have a video camera at the ticket booth that would make a close-up registry of all the visitors. As a result, no recorded image of the criminal was available.

Another strange sensation was that the members of staff were, of course, the most likely suspects. In a book or in a film, things like this seem entirely logical, but when it affects your own organisation it comes as a shock. I am convinced that we were all subject to a discrete check. In the course of the next few weeks, two police detectives visited the museum almost every day, and spoke to various members of staff to try to extract more information from them. They were especially interested in the visitors to the museum, both before and after the robbery.

The raider must have prepared the robbery very carefully, visiting the museum at least once before hand, and possibly several times. The detectives thought that the crime might have been committed by a mentally unstable person, an opinion they based on the method he had adopted. As a result, they thought there was a chance he would return to the scene of the crime - a theory that naturally added to the general sense of unrest in the museum.

The detectives' visits were never announced. However necessary this may have been to the proper conduct of investigations, it also had a disturbing effect on all those involved. This came on top of the unease among the guards, who saw suspicious behaviour everywhere in the museum in the months after the robbery.

As the investigations did not lead to concrete results, the police decided to include this crime in the television programme *Crimewatch*, in which unsolved crimes are discussed in the hope that viewers may provide valuable clues.

The museum had no say in this decision. We spent a day negotiating with the television crew on how the museum was to be presented. It turned out that every single shot needed to be discussed. We could only just prevent the crew from filming a police photo of the smashed showcase, when they had been denied access to the actual case itself.

The programme did not lead to new developments. The following summer, the police obtained search warrants for two houses belonging to two people who were regular visitors to the museum. In vain. To date, the gold bar has still not been found.

The Officials and the Board of Trustees

When a national museum is robbed in broad daylight - a pretty spectacular incident - it seems logical to inform the government and the

Board of Trustees as soon as possible. After all, the case should really be outlined to them before they are approached by the press, which they most inevitably will be. Besides, some people might be offended by not hearing the facts directly from the museum director.

In the event, immediately after the robbery, the head of communications and the director merely composed an on-the-spot list of names and numbers. Some valuable time was lost in tracing which people needed immediately to be informed. Luckily, everybody could be reached within an hour of the robbery. Now, of course, we have a full list of names and addresses, which is updated every six months.

The content of the message itself is extremely important. It is bad enough to have lost a gold bar, but it could be even more damaging to the museum to disseminate vague or incorrect information about the robbery. The content needed to be simple and straightforward. Our message expressed the essence of the matter in only a few sentences, which were then used in all communications by the museum for the rest of the day.

In retrospect we were very glad that we had taken ten minutes of solitude to formulate this message as clearly and concisely as possible. It focused on the fact of the robbery, and on the responsibility for this calamity. There were four elements:

- A raid had taken place in daylight at a national museum.
- A precious gold bar which had been given to the museum had been stolen.
- All alarm systems had worked, the guards had behaved like heroes, and the police had arrived at the scene immediately.
- The criminal had escaped.

A useful function of these calls - which we understood only much later - was that they reassured everyone we phoned that the crisis was being dealt with properly, and that there was no need for them to intervene.

In the following weeks there were, of course, more formal contacts. Reports had to be made, and negotiations on a reward had to be conducted with the authorities. Despite the somewhat dramatic nature of the subject matter, this involved little more than routine, time-consuming bureaucracy.

The Press

Fifteen minutes after the robbery the first journalists were already at the doors of the museum. Although officially this is forbidden, police radio communications are continuously monitored by press informers. Fifteen minutes after the robbery, we were speaking to the shaken guards and to the police in an attempt to establish what exactly had happened. We were not yet prepared for meeting the press. It was soon apparent that the robbery was going to be one of the day's most sensational news items.

One reason for the journalists' attention was that the gold bar had been officially handed over to the museum only three weeks earlier by two secretaries of state. This bar had a fascinatingly romantic and violent history. A small exhibition had been mounted to accompany its reception by the museum, and as this had received national television and press coverage, it was still fresh in the public memory.

In my opinion, there was also another mechanism at work. The target of the robbery was not private property, but public property. It belonged to the nation, and it was stolen from a public institution in a most spectacular way. The journalists were sniffing around for an irresponsible institution, or for an organisation that had failed.

The police had brought along its own press officer, who was constantly being called up by journalists on his mobile phone. Though he was not properly briefed on the situation, this - as we soon became aware - did not prevent him from giving inaccurate information to the press.

We had never realised that the loyalties of a police press officer are not to the victims of a crime, and that not all information about a disaster of such magnitude needed to come from one source. It took a serious talk to work out a common strategy for coping with the press attention; without it, there would have been separate strategies.

After the ten minutes of seclusion in which we formulated our basic message to the government officials and the Board of Trustees, we had a sound basis for talking to the press. But we had not yet found the time to write an official statement which could be transmitted by fax or e-mail.

Gradually, the attention of the media was building up. In retrospect, it might have been a good idea to organise a press conference. On the other hand, dealing separately with all the television crews and journalists also had its advantages. They all received personal attention, which guaranteed more uniformity in the dissemination of the information, and gave no-one an opportunity to build up a picture of organisational failure.

Requests to film in the exhibition space were all refused, no matter how much pressure was put on us. There were three good reasons for this refusal:

- Security reasons: like this, we could better protect the rest of the exhibition.
- Extra logistical problems (i.e. leading crews through the closed museum) could be avoided.
- Filming would only invite extra emotions (might the director burst into tears next to the smashed case?). Journalists might love such things, but we wouldn't.

In the course of the evening our own press release was finally disseminated as widely as possible. We were helped in this by our colleagues from the neighbouring National Museum of Antiquities, who

had recently experienced some sudden, potentially negative, press interest. They let us use their own complete, ready-made set of fax pages for dispatch to all press agencies and journalists. Now, of course, we have our own stock of such press releases, which are checked regularly.

Thanks to the eagerness of the police press officer, it turned out that we had to make several calls to press agencies to amend inaccurate information they had been given. Luckily all the people in question made the necessary corrections.

From this experience we learnt two things:

- Before anybody communicates anything to the press, it is crucial that a single written statement is prepared.
- It is also crucial that one person from the museum, and one only, does all the talking to the press.

That day, the news of the robbery was presented in every TV and radio news bulletin. The next morning it was in all newspapers, too. Our museum was suddenly famous. With our basic message we had been successful: the general feeling was anger towards the criminal, and compassion for the museum. After this explosion of public attention, journalists regularly called us to hear whether the gold bar had been returned. And, after more than a year, the museum is still remembered for the theft of the gold bar, and the gold bar for the museum. Strangely enough, in terms of publicity, the robbery has been very, very beneficial to us.

Conclusion

If just some of our colleagues take the trouble to have a new and critical look at their emergency plan, the aim of this paper will have been attained. Does your plan have a chapter that is dedicated to the moments in the immediate aftermath of the emergency? Do the members of the crisis team have a clear idea of their tasks and of the people they will be dealing with? Is there a section devoted to crisis management and all its short-term and long-term consequences? Let me assure you, it takes months before an organisation has fully recovered from an emergency like ours.

Quite involuntarily, our museum experienced the ultimate test of any emergency plan. We have used this event to improve this plan's quality. But, believe me; it is much better to devote some time to it now, than to wait until a disaster actually happens.