CORONAVIRUS

Pandemic, Obedience, and the Challenge of Analysis

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HEALTH

Professor Warns New Coronavirus Has Same Kill Rate as the Spanish Flu

Spanish flu killed 20-50 million people.

MISLEADING

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Introduction

Pandemics are tough on the decision-making process for organization leadership teams. This is, in part, because organizations are dealing with issues and concerns of safety vs security. When it comes to chronic safety concerns, it's hard to establish tripwires and thresholds that are more easily applied to acute issues of security. Pandemics are, in themselves, NOT security incidents; they are SAFETY incidents. While threats to security can arise from safety incidents like pandemics, the key concerns of a pandemic are rooted in issues of safety.

When pandemics grow to become international incidents, operational and ministry planning in the short and mid-term becomes much harder. The biggest inhibitor of decision making is the ambiguity of the situation. That ambiguity leads to uncertainty; especially when trying to discern truth from a 24-hour news cycle or skewed internet resources.

A few years ago, during the West Africa Ebola outbreak, I wrote a similar piece on decision making during safety incidents like pandemics. Though Coronavirus and Ebola are fundamentally different diseases, the principles of decision making for evangelical agencies remain the same. From that original document, I said:

> *In the world of biblical risk management, safety and security are intended to do the same thing: protect human life from the threat of physical injury or harm. However, safety, in this context, protects people from something very different than security.*
>
> *Safety deals primarily with protection from natural threats that can harm living beings; human or otherwise. Apart from humans, 'beings' primarily refers to animals but to a lesser extent can include plant life that can otherwise be harmed or violated accidentally.*
>
> *That said, biblical risk management is worried primarily about the protection of humans (no offence, Fluffy...). This includes events in nature (tornado safety, hurricane safety, earthquake safety, etc.), disease (health safety), etc.*

Because organizational leaders are dealing with issues and concerns of personnel safety, snap decisions based on limited information, and exacerbated by raw emotion, should certainly be avoided. With pandemics, the only certainty seems to be UNCERTAINTY. Therefore, decision making should be highly influenced by ***precedent***. Precedent in this case is defined as "long-term outcomes based on the mission of the organization and personal calling of our personnel, rooted in the values and ethos of the organization. This approach, vs decision-making based on short-term concerns driven by emotion, should influence decision making.

Insight

It is important for watchmen (security leaders in Gospel-minded organizations based on Ezekiel 33:1-6) to understand not only what the threat landscape shows them, but also what risks the culture values and the ethos of their organizations will accept. Here are some ideas on how this process works with threats to personal safety:

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1. **Establish values based on mission.** What are the values of the organization in the midst of an ongoing safety threat? In the case of pandemics, values based on mission are critical. "Don't get infected." Great idea. But WHY don't we want our people to infected? That WHY is defined by mission. Once the WHY is determined, the HOW of avoiding infection can be established in order to best fulfill the mission.

   When Ebola hit West Africa (and most recently Eastern DRC), the expat missionary workers of many mission agencies avoided infection by using the principles of relocation and/or evacuation. This is because their mission (providing education, planting churches, etc.) could not be accomplished when an external safety concern directly impacted their personnel. It was considered good stewardship to pull back, let the disease run its course, and go back after the threat had diminished. The mission determined the HOW of avoiding infection, and that HOW built resilience into the long-term mission by allowing those workers to return after the threat had passed.

   That said, Christian medical teams treating the virus utilized the same principles but to a far different end. This is because the mission of the medical ministries was to treat Ebola patients and stop the spread of the disease. Therefore, their protocols for avoiding infection were also designed to build resilience into the mission but did so in the middle of the red zones where risk of infection was highest. They also accepted that, considering the mission, the possibility of their workers contracting the infection was high. Therefore, steps were taken to prepare the organization for the loss of personnel to the infection in the completion of the mission.

   In both cases we see the same principle at play. Both organizations established their values based on their organization's mission while capitalizing on the calling of their personnel toward. And they did this toward two VERY DFIFFERENT outcomes (evacuate vs enter and remain in the red zones). Both organizations were prudent in their safety; both organizations accomplished their mission.

2. **Develop triggers based on mission, not safety.** What often sets Evangelical mission agencies apart from their secular humanitarian/NGO/IO counterparts is the fact that we believe that if something is worth dying for, it's worth living for—even if the potential of harm or death is higher given the threat landscape. Therefore, risk tolerances toward an existential safety threats like pandemics are often higher than our secular counterparts. Even when existential threats may threaten mission success, that risk is often accepted because some things, like the Truth of the Gospel, are worth dying for (Romans 5:7-17).

   History is wrought with examples of Christians "rescuing the perishing and caring for the dying" during pandemics. From the Plague of Cyprian in the Third Century to the Black Death 1348-1350, to more recent outbreaks like SARS, Ebola, and now Coronavirus, Christians have a long history of living their faith in

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the epicenter of pandemics. Candida Moss, a professor of New Testament and Early Christianity at Notre Dame, notes that an "epidemic that seemed like the end of the world actually promoted the spread of Christianity." By their actions in the face of possible death, Christians showed their neighbors that "Christianity is worth dying for." (*Running Toward the Plague: Christians and Ebola*. Eric Metaxas. Christian Post. 10.16.14)

Therefore, tripwires and thresholds based on mission allow agency leaders to ride out uncertainty. They also allow near-term operational decisions to be made considering the bigger picture of long-term goals based on the mission. This, in turn, provides guidelines and context for seasonal decision making that otherwise might be skewed by emotions compounded by the roller coaster effect of day-in-day-out observation of the situation.

3. **When it comes to complex threats, stop thinking basic math; start thinking algebra.** Often, we try to solve equations based on A + B = C. During time of complex threats, however, decision making deeply rooted in wisdom is critical. Remember, God is not the author of confusion (1 Corinthians 14:33) and we must be cautious of oversimplifying decision making during complex situations. Instead of A + B = C, we must move to a different equation: A + (B/X) = C. This equation requires us to solve for X. Let me explain:

    A + (B/X) = C can be defined as:
    > A = Our Highest Value (the Gospel)
    > B = Our Highest Priorities (personnel, programs and projects)
    > C = Our Highest Precedent (intended outcomes for mission success)
    > X = Disruptors (factors that impact or impair our Priorities)

    In this equation we see that X is NECESSARY for mission success. That means when we solve for X, we must do so by balancing the equation based on our Values, Priorities, and Precedent. For example, if meeting needs resulting from a pandemic is a priority, then staying in a location, despite the X threat, will empower mission success. With some ministries, meeting needs as the result of the X threat IS the mission. Therefore, the risk of infection is counted in the equation as we establish our priorities.

    However, if the highest priority is protecting the lives of team members and their families in order to continue the mission after the threat passes, then relocation or evacuation is justified toward the long game of mission success. Thus, the X threat is accounted for by avoiding the X threat altogether (or, until the organization can no longer avoid the X threat and must again rebalance the equation. Such an example would be Spanish Flu and its impact on the USA once the disease manifested itself domestically and infected the very team members evacuated for their safety from overseas).

    Think about it: In God's sovereignty, the Lord accounts for the X factors. They don't catch Him by surprise. Moreover, God even uses the X factors to glorify Himself. Indeed, God may well be the author of the X factor. Remember the Lord

Himself sent the plagues upon Egypt in the book of Exodus. The Lord also says: "*I form light and create darkness, I make well-being and create calamity, I am the Lord, who does all these things.*" (Isaiah 45:7). Evangelical organizations must understand that God uses the X factors that often inhibit and impair our ministry priorities for His glory and the good of humanity. We must understand that and USE that understanding as wisdom in our organization's decision-making process.

4. **Vulnerability vs threat, probability vs impact, and godly stewardship in light of risk and obedience**. Anyone who has been in a security, risk, or crisis management role for any amount of time should understand how to establish and quantify risk. The Bible is clear that Jesus expects His followers to quantify risk in their calling and service. Jesus Himself says so when He gave us the parables of a man building a tower and a King going off to war (Luke 14). Therefore, the monitoring of pandemics and quantifying risk in light of the threat -from the epicenter to the diaspora impact- must be understood and prioritized.

Long term events like pandemics require an even deeper and longer assessment of what mission success looks like considering the threat. This process allows us to not only create tripwires for actions such as evacuations, it also allows for critical decision making through benchmarking for return to a ministry location based on the new normal of probability, impact, and the reduction of vulnerability based on the new threat landscape. Thus, a new risk appetite can be established considering the highest precedent, as well as new mitigators to new vulnerabilities. This, in turn, allows organizations to redefine success considering the new normal. They can, essentially, begin the process of "solving for X." This includes the stewardship of time, money, and life as organizations invest in planning and preparation based on the organization's mission profile, presence, activities, and risk appetite.

Final Thoughts

As the watchmen of our respective organizations, we have a duty before God to provide our leaders with the most up to date, relevant, and _factual_ information possible. This, in turn, helps organization leaders make the best decisions using God-given wisdom and our information. This can be exceedingly hard to do when dealing with complex safety threats like pandemics. Nevertheless, whether threats are quantified as safety or security, we know the Lord is sovereign and expects His watchmen to do the job that they are given.

It is my prayer that these insights are helpful and empower the Lord's watchmen to best serve the Lord and their organizations--for God's glory and the good of the kingdom.

In Christ,
Scott Brawner

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About the Author

Scott Brawner is President of Concilium and the Executive Director of the Risk Management Network.

Scott accepted Jesus as his personal Savior in January of 1987 and served in the United States Army with the First Ranger Battalion in Operation Desert Storm.

Scott was called to Gospel ministry on active duty and is a licensed and ordained minister.

Scott holds a BA degree in History and a MA in Christian Education. Scott has worked in mission sending and security endeavors for more than 20 years including founding and leading the Fusion ministry now operated by the International Mission Board and Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary.

Scott served for seven years as Director of Risk Management for the International Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention (IMB). During that time, Brawner partnered with security directors from multiple US mission agencies and NGOs to create the Risk Management Network (RMN), an interactive network of Evangelical security and risk management professionals. The RMN includes security professionals serving evangelical organizations and churches representing more than 100,000 missionaries and NGO personnel globally. Brawner has coordinated this network since its inception.

In 2010, in collaboration with the US State Department Bureau of Diplomatic Security's Overseas Security and Advisory Council (OSAC), Brawner and other faith-based security leaders in the private sector created a Faith-Based Working Group. Scott served as co-chairman of this group and continues to champion the needs of faith-based organizations throughout the US Government.

In 2013, Brawner was asked by the Secretary of State to join the prestigious OSAC Council. The Council is comprised of only 34 private sector and public sector member organizations that represent specific industries or agencies operating abroad to provide direction and guidance to develop programs that most benefit the U.S. private sector overseas. Scott now serves the Council in a Senior Advisor role.

Professional affiliations include Overseas Security Advisory Council (OSAC), Risk Management Network, American Legion, US Army Ranger Association, NGO Security Network, and the International NGO Safety and Security Association (INSSA).

Scott lives in the United States with his wife and three children.

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