Emergency Procedures in the Executive Team

– preparedness is a muscle, not a document

By **Mads Cronquist** · Cronquist Consult ApS

Most companies have a contingency plan. It sits in a binder, on a drive or in a quality system. It is thorough, approved – and rarely opened.

The question is not whether the plan exists. The question is whether the executive team, the leadership team and the middle managers can act on it when it really matters – on a Friday afternoon, with only half the necessary information available and all eyes on them.

This article is about why preparedness is a muscle and not a document – and how leaders train it.

When Denmark shut down

In March 2020, Denmark shut down almost overnight. At the time I wrote the article "Krisestyring og ledelse" (Crisis Management and Leadership, in Danish), because the situation showed so clearly the difference between organisations that had a plan and organisations that had trained it.

Few had foreseen a pandemic. But some leadership teams got going faster than others. They knew who should be assembled, who made which decisions, and how employees should be informed. They did not necessarily have the best plan – but they had practised using it.

My point then is the same today: Being ready to be ready is about a good plan, practising it, evaluating, learning and adjusting – and then doing it again. Many times.

> *It is not the plan that saves you in a crisis. It is the people who have trained it.*

Train what rarely happens

As pilots, we train emergency procedures that we hopefully never need. We learn the first critical actions by heart, so they are second nature when the pulse rises. Only then do we take out the checklist. That is not because pilots are bad at thinking – it is because no one thinks clearly in the first seconds of a crisis.

In companies it is typically the other way round. People train what happens every day and hope that experience will be enough when the unexpected occurs. But cyberattacks, social media storms, a whistleblower case, disruption of critical infrastructure or a serious accident are characterised precisely by happening rarely – and therefore cannot be learned in everyday work.

That is why they must be trained. Not to predict the next crisis, but to build the reflexes that make it possible to act, whatever crisis comes.

The executive team's first hour

The first hour often decides whether a crisis is handled or escalates. There is no time to discuss who is responsible. It must be agreed in advance.

Roles: Who leads the crisis team? Who is responsible for operations, for communication and for contact with the board, authorities and customers?

Decision rights: What can the crisis team decide on its own – and when must the board or owners be involved?

Information rhythm: When does the crisis team meet again, and when do employees get the next update – even if there is nothing new?

Facts and assumptions: What do we know, what do we believe, and what do we not know? Write it down and update it continuously.

One voice externally: Who speaks – and what does everyone else say when asked?

Middle managers are the front line

A crisis is not only handled in the executive team's meeting room. It is handled on the front line – by the middle managers and supervisors who face worried employees, impatient customers and questions they have no answers to.

If middle managers do not know the intent and their own room for manoeuvre, they wait for instructions. And in a crisis, waiting is expensive. That is why middle managers must be part of the preparedness: They must know the plan, know what they can decide themselves, and have practised the difficult conversations before they have to hold them for real.

The middle manager is the strategy's translator in everyday work – and even more so when things are on fire. I have written more about the role in "The Middle Manager – the Strategy's Translator".

Psychological safety is the oxygen mask

When cabin pressure drops, the oxygen mask is the first thing that has to work. In a leadership team under pressure, psychological safety is the equivalent: Without it, people hold back bad news, do not dare ask questions and do not speak up when a decision is heading in the wrong direction.

In aviation it became an important realisation that many accidents were not caused by technology, but by the crew not saying what they saw. The same happens in executive teams. The person who sees the problem first is rarely the one at the head of the table. That is why it must be legitimate – and expected – to say stop.

Training after the fact is expensive

When I worked for Médecins Sans Frontières during the war in Bosnia, I discovered that no one had been trained in the equipment we depended on. We had to train everyone locally – after the fact and under pressure. It worked, but it cost time and energy that we could have spent on what we were really there for.

It is the same in companies. Training after the fact is always more expensive than training in advance – financially, humanly and in terms of reputation. It is far cheaper to fail in an exercise than in reality.

Emergency scenarios – a simulator for the executive team

It does not have to be complicated. A 90-minute emergency exercise can make a big difference: The executive team or leadership team is given a realistic scenario – a cyberattack at 4.30 p.m. on a Friday, a video spreading on social media, or an anonymous report of serious misconduct. New information comes in along the way, and the group must make decisions, communicate and prioritise under time pressure.

Then comes the most important part: The debriefing. What went well? Where did we get stuck? Who lacked information? What should we adjust in the plan? Without a debriefing, the exercise is just an experience. With a debriefing, it becomes preparedness.

At OLTC, drawing on more than 35 years of experience, we have trained leaders and leadership teams to make decisions under pressure – in nature and in business simulators where the scenarios are linked to the company's own reality. The experience is clear: Those who have trained act faster, more calmly and more cohesively when it really matters.

Emergency preparedness and crisis leadership in practice

We have gathered the experience in the programme Emergency Preparedness and Crisis Leadership, which is Denmark's only programme of its kind for the civilian business community and public organisations. Typically 8–12 leaders or team members take part in three intensive residential days, and the framework is agreed with each organisation.

Participants work with simulators and realistic scenarios such as rescue operations and firefighting. The tasks are deliberately unfamiliar, and the information is incomplete. But the focus is not on firefighting and rescue – it is on leadership, collaboration and decisiveness. Each exercise consists of briefing, task execution, observation and joint reflection, and participants learn a structured approach to making decisions under pressure.

After each exercise, we evaluate what created overview and decisiveness, where collaboration became difficult, and what the team will do differently. The experience is transferred to the organisation's own situations: A failing delivery, an incident that requires rapid coordination, or a leadership team that has to act before all the answers are available.

The programme builds on my own background as a trained emergency management officer and incident commander, on leadership during the war in Bosnia, where I had overall project responsibility for Danish Mobile Hospital, and on the development and design of mobile hospital units for earthquake disasters in Japan – including a command and coordination unit. This experience is supplemented by many years in management and executive positions in business.

Six elements that are trained:

- **Situational awareness:** What do we know, what do we assume, and what are we missing?
- **Decisions under pressure:** Prioritising and acting on an incomplete basis.
- **Direction and roles:** Clear task, responsibility and intent.
- **Communication:** Clear messages – and checking that they have been understood.
- **Coordination:** Making the team's contributions fit together as one effort.
- **Adaptation and follow-up:** Adjusting actions when the situation changes.

The emergency procedure on one page

What the executive team and leadership team should have ready:

- **Crisis team:** Who is assembled – and who is the deputy if someone is away?
- **Decision rights:** What can the crisis team decide itself, and when is the board involved?
- **Middle managers:** What can they decide locally, and how are they informed?
- **Communication:** Who speaks, and when is the next update?
- **Training:** When do we practise next – and how do we debrief?

Three questions for the leadership team

Ask yourselves:

- When did we last practise a crisis – and not just read the plan?
- Do our middle managers know what they can decide themselves when things are on fire?
- Is it legitimate here to say stop when we are heading in the wrong direction?

Conclusion – preparedness is a muscle

A contingency plan in a binder protects no one. It is the people who have trained it who make the difference. Preparedness is a muscle that must be trained regularly – otherwise it goes slack.

So the next time the executive team or leadership team meets, the question can be simple: If it happens today – do we know who does what in the first hour?

This article builds on my LinkedIn articles "Nødprocedurer i lederskab" (2026) and "Krisestyring og ledelse" (2020).

Is your leadership ready to be ready?

Cronquist Consult ApS and OLTC train executive teams, leadership teams and middle managers in decision-making and collaboration under pressure. Read more here:
Leadership team development · Emergency preparedness and crisis leadership · Middle management development