

Webinar Summary: Reputational Management, Decision Making & Crisis Communications

The webinar was chaired by **Mick Bayne**, CEO of Biscon Planning, who opened the session by outlining the growing importance of reputational management and crisis readiness. He emphasised that Biscon delivers specialist business continuity, risk management and resilience services, and positioned the session as part of a regular programme designed to help organisations prepare for foreseeable crises.

Martin Cleworth, Associate Consultant at Biscon Planning and a former senior police officer, led the first substantive section. Drawing on over 30 years' experience in law enforcement, crisis negotiation and major incident command, Martin explained that organisations now face heightened expectations, increased scrutiny and a powerful role played by social media. He described two broad types of crises: *slow-burn crises*, often driven by cultural failings and ignored warning signs, and *sudden-impact crises*, such as cyber incidents or major operational failures. Martin stressed that poorly executed decisions and weak communication frequently worsen outcomes, particularly for those most affected, and that organisations must prepare in advance rather than react once a crisis is underway.

Martin also introduced a values-led approach to crisis decision making, adapted from established public-sector and emergency-services models. He highlighted the importance of gathering accurate information, identifying key risks and priorities, and placing organisational values at the centre of decision making. He referenced lessons from public inquiries, including Grenfell and the Stephen Lawrence Inquiry, to underline that reputational damage is often driven less by the incident itself and more by the effectiveness, or perceived failure, of the organisational response. Empathy, integrity and clear accountability were presented as essential throughout any crisis response.

The session then moved to crisis communications, led by **Mick Ord**, former BBC journalist and media consultant with over 30 years' experience reporting on major disasters, including Hillsborough and Heysel. Mick focused heavily on the importance of preparation, stating that organisations must identify their audiences, train spokespeople and agree clear messages well in advance of a crisis. He introduced the "rule of three", advising that spokespeople should limit themselves to no more than three clear messages per media interaction to maintain clarity under pressure.

Mick also shared a practical and proven communications framework often used during media responses to major incidents: **pity, praise and promise**. He explained that effective early statements should first show *pity* by acknowledging those affected and demonstrating genuine empathy; *praise* those responding to the incident, such as frontline staff or emergency services; and make a *promise* to investigate, provide updates and put things right where possible.

He further highlighted the significance of the “golden hour”, explaining that rapid, well-judged communication is crucial in shaping public perception, particularly in a 24-hour news and social-media environment. He strongly advised against using the phrase “no comment”, recommending instead the use of holding statements that explain what is known, what is being investigated and when further updates will be provided. Using real-world examples, including Virgin Trains and KFC, he demonstrated how honesty, authenticity and empathy can help organisations maintain public trust during difficult moments.

In the final section, **Martin Cleworth** returned to summarise the key learning points. He reinforced that “hope is not a strategy” and encouraged organisations to understand their vulnerabilities, maintain robust business continuity plans and regularly rehearse crisis responses. He stressed the importance of training crisis management teams, fostering a culture where staff feel able to raise issues early, and learning lessons from near-misses as well as major incidents. The webinar closed with a facilitated Q&A, reiterating that strong preparation, values-based leadership and effective communication together form the foundation of organisational resilience.

Q&A Discussion Highlights

The webinar concluded with a detailed Q&A session facilitated by **Mick Bayne**, drawing out practical considerations around foreseeability, risk, media handling and organisational readiness.

One of the opening questions focused on the concept of “**reasonably foreseeable**” risks. **Martin Cleworth** explained that this term frequently appears in post-incident inquiries and public scrutiny, referencing examples such as the Manchester Arena Inquiry and recent public investigations. He emphasised that organisations are expected to have plans in place for risks that are widely recognised, such as cyber incidents, IT failures or operational disruption, and that failure to prepare for foreseeable risks can significantly damage credibility. Ultimately, he noted, it is customers, service users and the wider public who judge whether an organisation should reasonably have been prepared.

The discussion then turned to the importance of **post-incident learning**. **Martin Cleworth** stressed that near misses must be treated as seriously as full crises, warning against complacency when an organisation “gets away with it”. Both Martin and **Mick Bayne** highlighted that failure to learn lessons is often exposed later, particularly during formal investigations, where organisations are challenged on why earlier warnings were not acted upon. References were made to Grenfell as a stark example of known issues not being adequately addressed.

Several questions focused on the “**golden hour**” of crisis communications. **Mick Ord** outlined the non-negotiables during this critical period, emphasising that organisations should never be pressured into media engagement without agreed messaging. He reiterated the importance of the *rule of three*, factual accuracy, avoidance of speculation, and early clarity about when further updates will be provided. Both speakers agreed that shaping the narrative early, rather than remaining silent, is essential in a 24-hour media and social media environment.

A recurring theme was the risks associated with the phrase “**no comment**”. **Mick Ord** was clear that its use almost always damages trust, suggesting instead that organisations issue holding statements that explain the situation and manage expectations. **Martin Cleworth** expanded on this by highlighting the vulnerability of frontline staff, noting that unbriefed employees responding informally to media enquiries can unintentionally undermine carefully prepared corporate messaging. He stressed the importance of briefing all staff, particularly those likely to encounter journalists, on how to respond professionally and consistently.

The discussion also explored the question of **who should act as spokesperson during a crisis**. **Mick Ord** advised that the role should be filled by the strongest communicator, not automatically the CEO or Head of Communications. He shared examples where deputies or operational leaders were more effective than senior

leaders, provided they had appropriate training. The consensus was that organisations should identify and train multiple potential spokespeople in advance to maintain flexibility.

Finally, questions addressed the **frequency of crisis exercises and media training**. **Martin Cleworth** recommended crisis management and business continuity exercises at least twice a year to maintain readiness, while **Mick Ord** suggested media training every two to three years, or more frequently where leadership teams change regularly. Both agreed that skills deteriorate quickly without practice and that regular rehearsal builds confidence and improves performance under pressure.

The Q&A reinforced the webinar's central message: effective crisis management depends not only on plans and procedures, but on culture, leadership, preparation and the ability to respond with clarity, empathy and integrity when it matters most.