Many small companies and organisations fail to mitigate risks or make any preparations to survive a disaster. How can we shift their way of thinking to incorporate crisis preparedness as part of their day to day operations so that they stand a better chance of surviving.

The anecdotal evidence to date suggests that the management of the decision making process may well be the most significant determining factor in the immediate post disaster crisis. Recovery is not simply a matter of following prescriptive measures set down, often years earlier, in a recovery plan.

Resilience in organisations is a factor of the culture and defensive style of the organisation. Three defensive styles are introduced with one of them, the Dialectic Pairing Group, is highlighted as being fundamentally more creative and organic than the other two. When there is a match between a group’s defensive style and the individual members there is a greater sense of purpose and meaning for those members. If we wish to promote Dialectic Pairing as a group process then we need to carefully consider how we attract suitable members if the day-to-day maintenance processes of the organisation are not to be disrupted.

A 'Cardiac Fitness' model for organisational resilience is briefly outlined using Dialectic Pairing group processes as a base from which to grow.
Introduction

Collecting information about the recovery phase after a disaster is difficult given the sensitivity that companies feel about any negative reporting of their business. Invariably the available literature is based on ‘after the fact’ evidence and is therefore subject to selection and some distortion of the events.

Part One of this paper is an extract of a conference paper presented by the Author in Toronto at the 12th World Conference on Disaster Management (Cousins 2002). It is based on direct observation, participation and field experience assisting organisations recover from disasters. In order to establish the relationship between planning and recovery I will include a brief reference to current planning practices. I will then discuss organisational adaptation after a disaster and the influence of the ‘Inventory Period’ immediately after a disaster. Three group structures emerge to manage the recovery and I will discuss why one of these structures, Dialectic Pairing, performs significantly better than the other two.

Part Two brings together some contemporary thinking on the management of organisations and describes the theoretical basis of a trial currently underway in Melbourne, Australia. I will briefly describe the ‘Crisis Incubation’ and the ‘Onion Model of Crisis Management’ before finally developing ‘The Cardiac Fitness Model’
that also serves to train and familiarise an organisation with Dialectic Pairing Processes.
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Part One – Field Experience

A. Current Industry Practices

The field of disaster management is still relatively early in its development. Despite some confusion around what is meant by terms such as ‘Business Continuity’, ‘Emergency Management’ or ‘Disaster Recovery’ each advocates a methodical approach to the development of formal ‘pro-active’ plans along similar lines:

1. Define objectives and assumptions
2. Gather facts and analyse requirements
3. Design the strategies
4. Create the plan
5. Implement the plan
6. Test the plan
7. Review/Update/Maintain the Plan
8. The execution stage (DRII).

(Australian National Audit Office, 2000; The Australian and New Zealand Standard, 4360:1999; The Disaster Recovery Institute International (DRII); The Business Continuity Institute (BCI); SafetyNet, 2001; The UK Dept of Trade and Industry (DTI); Survive – The Business Continuity Group (BCG) and GlobalContinuity.Com).

In general terms most plans dissolve fairly quickly after first contact with the reality of the aftermath of a disaster. However, it is my experience that organisations that have been through a planning process perform better after a crisis than those that have not, whether or not the plan is followed. The main practical value of the process appears to lie in the attention given to the underlying structural needs of the organisation and the allocation of resources and other requirements, which are therefore available to be utilised reactively in the recovery phase. There is another benefit, and that is that the experience of going through the planning process itself can reinforce a sense that the defence of the organisation must be a cooperative effort.

Organisations that have not been through the planning experience take longer to get organised and find it more difficult to sort and evaluate information and to prioritise. Poorly formed perceptions of the loss are developed in the first few days after a disaster and these become difficult to shift. Confusion occurs when new information comes to light that does not correlate with the initial perceptions. There is difficulty relating the reactive strategy to the actual extent of damage and the workers are more likely to take extreme positions and operate in a hostile and avoidant mode. Vital opportunities to take control of the situation in the first few days are missed, and the recovery suffers. It is therefore important to consider what happens to perceptions and information flow after a disaster.
B. Organisational Adaptation after a Disaster

The ability to change and re-organise to suit new conditions is the ‘fitness’ of the business in its environment. The pressure that demands changes is called the ‘fitness landscape’. (Clippinger III. 1999).

Figure 1 The Perfectly Adapted Organisation

The organisation has adapted perfectly to the demands of the fitness landscape.

When the fitness landscape changes, as in a disaster, so must the organisation in order to survive.

Figure 2 A Changed Fitness Landscape

Changed conditions in the fitness landscape diminish the ability of the organisation to function. It requires a corresponding organisational change.

Managers of the organisation must first correctly identify and characterise the altered landscape and then find and disseminate the right descriptions and definitions within the organisation to give meaning and purpose to a responsive action. The most effective recoveries are realised when the participants are not directed from above but are allowed to develop their own responsive actions based on clear global objectives and well-developed understanding of the business requirements. For example, if the CEO gave a directive along the lines that the IT department will have the ‘computer system up and operational by 2pm tomorrow at the latest’, that then becomes the
fitness landscape to which the IT department must adapt. On the face of it, complexity is reduced with the simple objective statement.

In 1994, I received instructions to have a computer system operational by a certain time after a fire destroyed the administration block of an electronics warehouse and repair centre. Alternative office space had already been secured and it was simply our job to relocate the server room and office computing facilities and establish a network link back to the warehouse. This was not a difficult task, and we easily met the deadline but the computers sat idly on the floor for another two days in the absence of suitable office furniture. Further delays involved the changed business procedures due to the distance between the warehouse and the office facilities.

A little more time taken to develop a three dimensional view of the fitness landscape in the minds of all involved would have avoided these delays. We could have had greater cross-departmental cooperation, enhanced problem solving and a faster recovery. In this instance, however, the recovery was directed from the vantage point of a single person’s view of the landscape that of the CEO, with little consultation with the staff involved.

In order to correctly identify and characterise the altered landscape a manager must make sense of clues, raw data and other evidence that arrives in no particular order from many different sources. Some of these clues may be graphic and clear, others murky and ambiguous. The perspective from which these clues are understood and conveyed to the manager will give rise to a view of the change that is invariably unique to each person. This view is codified and internalised as a model, which the manager then uses to ‘look ahead’ and anticipate outcomes.

![Figure 3 The Perception of the Change](image)

The organisation perceives these changes with some degree of inaccuracy.

Each person involved will have their own view of the situation and their own corresponding internal model. The ideas and solutions that each person puts forward are formed in response to anticipated outcomes based on their own internal model. These views will change and/or compete for dominance and the group, as a whole is unlikely to arrive at a coherent view of the presenting problem. The diversity of
realities can cause confusions and conflict and may threaten to reduce an organisation to a level of chaotic functioning.

People have different views. There is no coherent perception of the change or what is required.

It is important to understand who holds the guiding mental maps, how they are shaped and reshaped in response to the changing situation and how this is shared with others.

To complicate matters, the situation is in constant flux and those involved require fresh updates to their internal models. The greater the flux the more frequently the updates will be required. This update, if not forthcoming from the management team, will be found from whatever source is available.
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C. The Inventory Process

Stanley Cohen describes in Folk Devils & Moral Panics, 1972, the Inventory phase immediately after the impact of the disaster as a phase “during which those exposed to the disaster begin to form a preliminary picture of what has happened and of their own condition.”

After life and limb are secure, the most significant and overwhelming need immediately after a loss or disaster is to remove, reduce or eliminate uncertainty and ambiguity. The natural response is to form a preliminary view, to seek out and ‘take stock of’ or ‘inventory’ the situation in order to understand what it is that has happened, to clarify ambiguous clues as well as to assess one’s own personal situation and what it means for the future.

This inventory process is driven by the need for certainty and involves the collection and sorting of information from all quarters. Some of this information is based in fact, with clear supporting empirical evidence, but the majority of it, initially at least, is not. It is driven in part by the levels of anxiety experienced at the time and includes, often very uncritically, myths and gossip, which in turn are subject to further modification. As information of varying ambiguity and quality flows in about what has happened, opinions are formed and divergent views about the nature and extent of the losses, and perceptions of the magnitude and form of future risks emerge. As these divergent perceptions compete for dominance, three conscious or unconscious manipulations of the presenting evidence occur as part of the common inventory and ‘weighing-up’ of the evidence.

Cohen uses the terms sensitisation and exaggeration in the inventory phase to describe processes that occur in community responses to moral threat. I have developed these for the inventory phase for the business situation (Cousins 2001) and describe the processes of sensitisation, magnification and codification.

a.) Sensitisation is the name given to the hyper vigilance where proponents of one or other view become increasingly sensitive to evidence that supports their own or emerging view. It is a common experience for individuals to report faults and/or damage occurring after an event when the objective evidence suggests that these had pre-existed for some time before, but were simply not noticed, merely being brought to light with the heightened awareness and increased attention and scrutiny following the event.

b.) Magnification refers to the amplification of the (usually negative) consequences of the evidence that has now been noticed. The minor fault now becomes impossible to live with - or is an indicator of an incipient collapse. The ‘stain’ becomes a ‘burn mark’ and ‘dust’ becomes ‘contamination’. Consider a situation where a perception is that the loss is all too much and overwhelming. A minor inconvenience that went more or less unnoticed before is now noticed and becomes ‘the last straw’ and further evidence of the dreadful circumstances that people find themselves in. If this view becomes the dominant view then the recovery effort will be seriously undermined.
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c.) Codification is the process whereby a common understanding is reached about what has happened. The complexity and bulk of the information has to be reduced to manageable proportions. Making sense is a complicated affair, and involves a degree of anxiety that serves to cloud objective judgment. Each participant will hold a different view, and each will give the situation a different meaning as far as their own personal future or their perception of the group's future is concerned. All of the hard evidence, intangibles, rumours, personal perceptions, fears and expectations become bundled into easily communicated phrases, statements and ‘media statements’. This is accomplished by reducing complex issues to simple ‘language codes’ or ‘Tags’ such as ‘it is ruined’ or ‘it is OK’ or ‘it is not worth putting back into service’

The end result of this process is a coded narrative of the extent of damage that is fixed and over simplified, and may not have a great overlap with external reality. In the context of the dynamically changing fitness landscape, rigidity can be counterproductive.

D. The Structure of the recovery group

The way in which the different personal experiences and knowledge of the situation are given meaning and shared within the decision making group is heavily influenced by the informal communication structures that spontaneously emerge to process information and meaning.

The decision-making groups I work with fall into one of three structures or arrangements, which I have termed: (Cousins 2002)

- Type 1. Hostile Avoidant
- Type 2. Directed
- Type 3. Dialectic Pairing

The defensive styles reflected in each of these classifications arise in response to the need to manage the underlying emotional threat of dissolution and chaos.

The structure of the Hostile Avoidant type and of the Directed type is driven along traditional hierarchical and historical patterns and workers often find it difficult to disregard the customary lines of responsibility and accountability. These groups are often shaped by the working style and emotional needs of bosses, rather than by the needs of the situation.
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Figure 6 Hostile Avoidant

When a Hostile Avoidant structure prevails, communication and meaning is directed towards dominating or avoiding issues. The fundamental need for certainty remains unmet and the resultant anxiety is projected onto each other. The fighting with and/or avoidance of others ensure that any good ideas, offers of support and other positive aspects are lost in the tension of defensiveness. People caught in this structure follow procedure, but are anxious and generally unhappy. They contribute only a fraction of their true potential and this is reflected in the length and cost of the recovery.

Figure 7 The Directed Type

The Directed group operates on the basis that there is a clearly identified and accepted leader usually mandated along historical lines of accountability. Where there is a pre-existing recovery plan, this may be adhered to slavishly. The leader supplies the subordinates’ needs for certainty, security and nurture and in return, processes and assigns meaning to information for them. However in adopting this structure, creativity within the subordinate group is stifled. The threat of rejection and the implied denial of the supply of certainty and security ensure that only those suggestions and ideas in close alignment with the internal view of the ‘gatekeeper’ are presented. The net result is a narrow range of relatively homogenous options. The
morale and strength of the response is highly dependant on the leader's emotional state and he/she quickly becomes overwhelmed with the amount and complexity of the work involved, with the inevitable flow on to the subordinates. Recovery situations where there is a tendency for this basic form to predominate are at high risk of running over budget and over time.

The Dialectic Pairing structure is the most successful across all the parameters of time, cost and work satisfaction. The Macquarie Dictionary definition of ‘dialectic’ follows to illustrate the nature of the logical debate found in Dialectic Pairing Groups.

**dialectic**

\[\text{dai\-e\-lekt\-ik}\]  (say duyuh\-lektik)  *adjective*  1. of, relating to, or of the nature of logical argumentation. 2. dialectal. 3. proceeding by or as if by debate between conflicting points of view.

---*noun* 4. a process of change that results from an interplay between opposite tendencies. 5. logical argumentation. 6. (often plural) a. logic or a branch of logic. b. any formal system of reasoning or thought. 7. See Hegelian dialectic. 8. dialectical materialism. 9. (in Kantian philosophy) the use of the principles of understanding in an attempt to determine objects beyond the limits of experience. [Latin dialectica, from Greek dialectiké (techné) argumentative (art); replacing Middle English dialetike, from Old French]

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In the aftermath of a disaster there is a great deal of information that needs to be rapidly and effectively processed, understood and relayed to others in the decision making team. The Dialectic Pairing structure is the most useful working unit for doing this task. It represents a dialectic functioning in which the whole decision-making group takes a part. A pair of group members who are able to discuss particular issues emerges within the group. The pairing is usually context sensitive and will float between members according to the issues to be discussed, the expertise and informal authority of the members. One of the pair is accepted, formally or informally as a senior. It is the authority of the senior in the pair that breaks any deadlocks, but it is only exercised after a balanced discussion within the group. It is important that the pair demonstrate that any contribution, idea or view, however poorly formed is given permission to be expressed and is considered seriously. The various strategies and the pros and cons are debated predominantly by the pair in the presence of the other decision makers. This discussion allows for the basis and complexity of the decision making to be observed, experienced and contributed to by the others, while at the same time eliminating the need for a second transfer and justification of the decision afterwards. In essence this process, by its very nature, builds a three dimensional view of the fitness landscape.

Figure 9 The Dialectic Pair

The recovery process, which operates in this structure, is characterised by high morale, creative and productive work, lowered anxieties and a sense of optimism for the future. Not only do these groups have a more dynamic and integrated structure, but they are also able to lift themselves beyond the threat of dissolution or chaotic collapse through a symbolic narrative of ‘unity’, ‘the heroic effort’ and other stories.
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Part Two – Training for Resilience

A. Crisis Incubation

Turner (1978) argued that the potential for failure, or crisis could incubate within an organisation until an incident exposes them, realising their catastrophic potential. This stems from a failure of management to recognise and anticipate a range of likely failures and to develop a set of precautionary norms within the organisation.

In this context the Hostile Avoidant and Directed Defensive styles would provide fertile ground for the incubation of ‘Resident Pathogens’ and a propensity to develop inadequate and inflexible precautionary norms. The Dialectic Pairing Model, on the other hand would allow for the generation and renewal of precautionary/resilience norms by allowing members to safely raise an alarm with a corresponding collaborative group response for a remedy. As a consequence, once discovered, an impending crisis is not allowed to incubate.

Table 1 Disaster Sequence and Remedies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stage</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Function</th>
<th>Task</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>During</td>
<td>Emergency Management</td>
<td>Preservation of Life &amp; Limb</td>
<td>Management of Events as they unfold</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>After</td>
<td>Business Recovery Management</td>
<td>Management of the Recovery/Regrowth Phase</td>
<td>Form Dialectic Pairing Group</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
B. The Onion Model of Crisis Management

Pauchant and Mitroff (1992) described four key factors or building blocks that make an organisation either ‘Crisis-Prone’ or ‘Crisis-Prepared’. Their ‘Onion Model of Crisis Management’ has four layers. From outside in these are

- ‘Organisational Strategies’
- ‘Organisational Structure’
- ‘Organisational Culture’
- ‘The Personality Profile / Character of Individuals working within Organisations’.

The central core was associated with the Psychological Defence Mechanisms of the Individual and how they relate to the organisational beliefs and rationalisations.

![Figure 10 From Pauchant, T. and Mitroff, I. (1992) ‘Transforming the Crisis-Prone Organisation’](image)

It is known that creative and innovative people will seek out new and risky work while maintenance thinkers will seek out safe routine and bounded work. What of the majority of us who are arranged somewhere between these two ends of the spectrum? The better the fit between the individual’s psychological defence mechanisms and the organisational beliefs and rationalisations (in short the organisational defence mechanism) the less anxious the individual.

If there is a good fit, then we are happy and operate within our ‘comfort zone’. If there is a poor fit then life outside our ‘comfort zone’ requires subsidy by effort or to be denatured with distractions. Anxious or unhappy individuals will leave an organisation resulting in increasing cultural homogeneity and common patterns of organisational defences.

It is highly unlikely that an organisation, in the context of a crisis or disaster, would develop a radically different defensive style. It is more likely that an organisation will fall back into the more familiar mode of operating. How then do we develop familiarity with the more resilient Dialectic Pairing style prior to an incident or emergency?
C. The Cardiac Fitness Model

Current management thinking embraces the concept of fostering creativity and innovation within organisations to improve long-term viability and increased organisational health. There are many parallels between the Dialectic Pairing Group function and many of the new management strategies. By combining these two we may find that we have an ideal solution that not only improves organisational ‘Fitness’ but also increases familiarity with the Dialectic Pairing group structure.

Kaufman (1993) describes an area of operating between too much order and too much chaos as the ‘Sweet Spot’. It is in this area that an organisation becomes adaptable and more resilient to crisis and change. It is a balance that facilitates self-regulation and self-organisation without a dictatorial management straitjacket and in doing so improves the future outlook for the organisation. Dialectic Pairing is a way of operating that has a natural valence for the sweet spot between order and chaos.

Helene Zampetakis (2003) describes in her article ‘Innovate or Die’ recent changes within AMP where there was a push to develop a ‘culture that was by its nature innovative’. An organic revolution in thinking was brought about by bringing people from different disciplines together to spark one another off. What she describes matches Dialectic Pairing groups, with the essential qualities of Motivation, Focus and Effective Use of Time. The tools they use, the structure of their meetings and the rewards derived from their efforts were all directed towards motivating members, maintaining a clear focus and allowing sufficient time (or reducing the time overhead by using the intranet chat rooms) to achieve their purpose:

What I propose is the development of a culture of short-lived problem solving teams that form in response to specific difficulties or triggers. They allow someone to emerge to Champion the cause and members derived from volunteers and/or by invitation. The teams have a specific focus and choose an appropriately titled name. The essential qualities of the team, Motivation, Focus and Use of Time need to be formally articulated and held as a central tenant of the group. Through this mechanism, the more open and creative members of the organisation will find a home and the organisation itself will begin to self select for those most likely to feel better operating within it. More specifically, we want to ensure the promotion of ‘Dialectic Pairing’ as a defensive style and increase the creativity and problems solving ability of the organisation that can be applied directly to day-to-day problems. The long-term view is to establish a culture of Dialectic Pairing that can be directed to resolve problems creatively and innovatively in the aftermath of a disaster.

The essential elements of building the team:

1. A current or future business problem or risk is identified.
2. An individual emerges to Champion the solution.
3. The Champion produces and publishes a one page ‘Call to Action’ detailing the problem / risk and articulates ‘The presenting problem to be solved’.
4. A time frame is set for the life of the Team (Never Indefinite).
5. A Team forms from volunteers or by invitation.
6. The Team decides on a name according to the problem / solution.
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7. The Team adopts a Motto to symbolise its purpose and character.
8. The team meets to solve the problem not to fill a time slot.
9. The Team Activities are advertised internally within the organisation.
10. The Core Tenants - Motivation, Focus and Effective Use of Time are promoted as a team culture.
11. The Team members are rewarded for their efforts and positive outcomes advertised internally with a short symbolic narrative of the effort.

An example ‘call to action’ that might be used to promote the activities of the Team internally within an organisation is presented below.

“The QA Rescue Squad”

The Challenge
We have 6 days to improve QA acceptance rates from 65% to 85%

Champion: Fred Evans
Members:
Peter Foley
Rose Gerraty
Luke Maloney

Motto: We meet as needed to solve our problem, not fill a time slot

Background: Quality has been slipping over the last few months despite our efforts to control or improve matters. We believe that there is an undiscovered and deteriorating flaw in our production process that is impinging on quality. Our customers have started asking questions. We will soon begin to lose customer accounts if this problem is not rectified.

We ask for your urgent help and assistance.
Conclusion

To improve fitness and resilience we need to exercise the ‘Heart of an Organisation – its people’. The presence and success of these teams will inevitably change the culture of the organisation by selecting for and against members according to their fit with the changing defensive organisational style.

Disasters will continue to occur even with the best risk management practices. The enormous social and economic costs that arise from a poor or failed recovery demonstrate a need to focus more attention on the recovery phase. By integrating the effective Dialectic Pairing defensive structures with pre-disaster organisational creativity and innovation teams we can both promote the fitness of the organisation and eliminate or reduce the tendency of an organisation to ‘Incubate a Crisis’.

When anxiety is contained and the requisite structures and processes for the sorting of information are established the presenting problems will be correctly identified, labelled and creative and effective solutions will emerge. Solutions to problems that could never have been anticipated or planned for in the first instance emerge spontaneously. When we see this happening we know that we have engineered an adaptive system that will perform well in the course of normal business as well as after a disaster.

Timothy Cousins
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