

Soft skills in a hard world: Why emergency management and business continuity leaders must update their professional toolbox

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ABSTRACT

In today's rapidly changing threat environment, especially amid the COVID-19 pandemic, the roles of emergency management (EM) and business continuity (BC) professionals are continuously evolving. Today's EM/BC professional has become more mission-critical than ever, with their position placed under a spotlight

as companies of all sizes prepare themselves for the next unknown, but inevitable, crisis. A common problem, however, is that many professionals with the requisite hard skills lack a light touch when it comes to communicating the goals they are striving to achieve. This paper discusses the importance of soft skills for the crisis management guru. The paper lays out which of the multitude of soft skills are the most critical, outlining ways for EM/BC professionals to build, utilise and maintain their soft skills, with case studies that exemplify the use or misuse of such skills.

Keywords: communication, hard skills, relationships, soft skills

INTRODUCTION

The recent spotlight on emergency management (EM) and business continuity (BC) professionals is likely welcome for many in the EM/BC field who have spent at least part of their career sitting in waiting, biding their time until disaster strikes and allows them, albeit briefly, to grab the attention of their senior executives or board. Today is a profoundly unique period in EM/BC history, with concerns about another major disruption to business at the forefront of many executives' minds; as such, it is imperative for



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EM/BC practitioners to adopt the skills of the consummate salesperson so that they can communicate the critical and positive impact of their programmes.

During a crisis, being an educator, communicator and sometimes even counsellor, is often as just critical as ensuring that one's EM/BC programme is being properly implemented, that teams are able to read through the checklists provided and are executing the necessary tasks to protect the business. In other words, for the EM/BC professional, soft skills can sometimes be as critical as hard skills.

This article explores the differences between hard and soft skills with a view to helping ensure that EM/BC professionals can explain to their superiors why they need to hone the softer side of their profession. The article identifies which soft skills EM/BC professionals should focus on developing and provides a series of real-world exemplars to explore the relationship between well-honed soft skills and the successful execution of the resilience life cycle, as well as the perils associated with poorly developed soft skills. The article also presents some best practices for honing these soft skills in both the pre-crisis environment and during a real incident.

THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN SOFT SKILLS AND HARD SKILLS

All too often, EM/BC professionals lack — or, more specifically, have not been given the opportunity to develop — the interpersonal skills necessary for teaching or the ability to counsel those people they are leading through crisis. These professionals are not bad at what they do — indeed, they are exceptionally well educated and credentialed; they are simply accustomed to sitting in a back room and only being heard from once in a while, if at all.

In recent times, however, certain developments have thrust EM/BC into the spotlight, making the EM/BC professional indispensable. Although there are undoubtedly positives to take from this unprecedented turn of events, the downside is that many EM/BC professionals lack the skill set for this new role at the forefront of the business, where they must rapidly educate their colleagues on how to deal with these evolving crises. These professionals are booksmart and knowledgeable, but they have either overlooked or not been given the opportunity to develop their soft skills. This is an important area to address because teaching and executing hard — and perishable — EM/BC skills requires a soft touch that some security professionals do not exercise or expand on their own.

But how does one distinguish a hard skill from a soft skill? Some might say that anything learned is a hard skill and anything innate is a soft skill, but this is too rigid a definition. In the simplest sense, a hard skill is a teachable ability or skill set that can be quantified.¹ A mathematical wunderkind still must study formulas and build on their basic concepts before they can solve the until-then unsolvable equation. Hard skills must be studied, learned, executed, mentored, refined and utilised to demonstrate mastery; they are in a sense something earned over time through a series of quizzes, examinations and products that professionals turn out. The core concepts of the resiliency life cycle, from planning to teaching, to the implementation of EM/BC knowledge, are all hard skills — ideas that may be easy for some to grasp and master but are not inherently innate. For example, a degree in EM/BC confers that the holder of said degree has spent a quantifiable period of time dedicating their time to a craft, demonstrating that they are likely far more competent in the area of expertise needed to address

a pandemic or terrorism event than the average person on the street. Conversely, the EM/BC professional may possess only a basic understanding of the hard skills needed to be a neurosurgeon, and one would not want to trust the former with surgery meant for the latter. Hard skills define a profession.

On the other hand, soft skills are more amorphous — they too can be learned, studied and taught, but there is an element to them that makes them both innate and susceptible to being overlooked at the same time. By definition, a soft skill is a person's ability to comprehend and respond in a constructive manner to another person's ideas, problems or questions, and being able to demonstrate or communicate resolutions to issues, challenges, problems or conflicts. In a nutshell, soft skills are about exercising influence and building trust with others.²

What then are the soft skills that an EM/BC professional needs to know? Is there a predefined list — a standard by which all professionals should base their

study and hone their craft? Figure 1, compiling just some of the various soft skills out there, demonstrates the skills that an EM/BC professional may utilise in the execution of their hard skills.

EM/BC professionals should not be intimidated by this list. For a start, this is but one list, and it is undoubtedly possible to add scores of other soft skills to it. Furthermore, practitioners will invariably have a mix of such skills in their toolbox already and should not panic if they are yet to master them. Nevertheless, as this article will discuss, there are certain skills that are particularly important for EM/BC professionals.

Soft skills complement EM/BC hard skills that are used on a daily basis, but strength in one does not necessarily translate to strength in the other. The right balance of soft and hard skills requires ongoing assessment and preparation, in the form of learning, *prior* to the interruption of business. Indeed, no EM/BC professional — no matter their proficiency — has time to be auditing their strengths



Figure 1 The top ten soft skills

Adapted from Wikijob Team (2021) 'Soft skills list: 10 important skills', available at: <https://www.wikijob.co.uk/content/interview-advice/competencies/soft-skills> (accessed 10th August, 2021). Images used with permission from the Noun Project by creators Daniel Thiele, Icons Fields, Webtechops, Nithinan Tata, Alimasykurm, Becirs, Armokay and Kira.

and weaknesses, or those of their team, during a crisis. No one wants to hear that the team responsible for resolving the crisis has a leader who is not proficient in X but extremely proficient in Y, especially if skill Y will not be applicable to the incident and its resolution necessitates a strong aptitude in skill X. So, how does one remedy this gap and fully utilise these critical soft skills?

In short: relationships.

At the foundational level, all relationships — whether between friends, relatives or business partners — have one thing in common: they are bridges intentionally built between persons. Relationships between people who may share common hard skills or, even better, complementary hard skills, create a stronger working unit in times of difficulties, and are fundamental to ensuring positive outcomes in a crisis or emergency.

A relationship can be likened to an assessment of assets. During any expedition, exercise or real-world incident, it is imperative to stay on top of such essentials as vehicles, personnel and water. Someone must know where to find the key information and how to access it — what vehicles are readily available, what skill sets personnel have, how much water is left. The same holds true for relationships. The ability to know everyone's strengths and weaknesses only adds value to an organisation's toolbox. But just as one must keep the inventory of assets up to date, so too must the EM/BC professional work at building relationships so they can be called on at some point in the future. While this may seem straightforward, security professionals often do a poor job at putting this into practice — a robust understanding and execution of soft skills is required to keep relationships alive and well.

The importance of relationships was exemplified during Hurricane Harvey, the devastating storm that struck the US Gulf

Coast in August 2017. During the storm and in its immediate aftermath, many volunteer organisations and individuals desired to assist with the relief efforts. These people, some of whom had been impacted by the storm themselves, had boats, trucks, supplies and other resources readily available to support the cause. This was a powerful and beautiful thing to witness first-hand. However, it was quite clear that the resources were being utilised on an *ad hoc* basis, without pre-planning or at least a guiding direction as to where best to utilise these abundant but previously unknown, or at least unacknowledged, resources.

When planning for a crisis, it is essential to know what assets will be available. How many working trucks do the National Guard units have? What resources are available from nonprofit organisations to help assist victims? Certainly, one cannot plan for all eventualities, such as individuals wanting to lend a hand, but first responders and emergency management personnel responding to the aftermath of Harvey would definitely have benefited from having a framework and an idea of what tools they could use during a crisis — something that could have been established simply by saying 'hello' and asking questions.

Of course, 'hello' is only the beginning. Soft skills are required to maintain the relationship and take the group over the finish-line post crisis. EM/BC professionals that invest in their teams will enjoy return from that investment. Simply put, when people have more to work with, they can do more with it. By sharing personal details, getting to know the strengths and weakness of team members, and establishing a group of personnel who can work together seamlessly in a crisis, EM/BC professionals are cultivating relationships for the long-term greater good. In the event of a crisis, they will benefit

from not having to waste time building rapport, having a better understanding of everyone's needs, and generally being on the same wavelength, thus saving money, protecting their company, and possibly even saving lives.

UNDERSTANDING, UTILISING AND LEARNING KEY SOFT SKILLS

Understanding that there are myriad soft skills available to the EM/BC professional is not the same as being proficient in those skills. The old adage that 'if everything is important, nothing is important' applies — no one person will excel in every area essential to building a well-rounded relationship. Therefore, choosing the right areas of focus is critical. The most important soft skills to focus on and utilise are: communication, flexibility, leadership/teamwork, responsibility, and decisiveness and problem solving. While this article will explore the real-world consequences of utilising or failing to utilise these skills in what follows, it is important to have a solid understanding of each skill and tips for developing them first.

Among EM/BC professionals, communication is one of the most important, if not *the* most important, yet underdeveloped soft skill. It encompasses not simply the verbal or written word, but *how* one conveys information to one's audience. For lack of a better term, communication is about being entrepreneurial — a good communicator understands their demeanour can be as impactful as what they are conveying and that communication is about selling an idea. Style, poise, presentation, posture and clarity of thought are imperative to ensuring that the receiver processes and understands the information being conveyed. A successful practitioner endears themselves to an audience, in whatever manner they are communicating, ensuring that the next

time they communicate the audience will recall the ease and simplicity with which they previously explained themselves.

To develop this skill, allocate time to reviewing your presentations to understand better which ideas lead to others, what questions may be anticipated, and how to respond to those questions. Command of this information goes hand in hand with a positive demeanour. Practitioners that do not feel comfortable with this soft skill need to put themselves into the uncomfortable situation of engaging with others, standing up in front of strangers and practising their art. Hiding behind a screen or in an office cannot be the status quo, even during a pandemic.

Since the outbreak of COVID-19, video communication platforms such as Zoom and Microsoft Teams have become part of everyday life. Indeed, according to a survey conducted by Gartner, from the 14th to the 21st March, 2020, usage of business communication apps increased 90 per cent from pre-pandemic weekly levels.³ Clearly then, it is important for EM/BC professionals to master these new communication tools.

One of the most effective ways to express connection is through eye contact. It is recommended that people maintain eye contact for 60–70 per cent of the time they communicate with each other; according to a study of one-to-one conversations conducted by Quantified Impressions, however, adults maintain eye contact for only 30–60 per cent of the time.⁴ Web conferencing has further diminished the utilisation of eye contact and must be actively addressed; for example, it is important to be mindful of camera angles, and move one's browser or notes to just below the camera lens in order to minimise looking anywhere but directly at the camera.

In addition to camera setup, the 'secret weapon' to convey confidence and a

positive attitude while working remotely is to smile. Psychologists who study virtual meetings recommend that participants smile at least 50 per cent more than they would during face-to-face meetings in order to humanise the experience and to demonstrate interest in the conversation.⁵ During incidents, having the right posture and proper ‘teleconferencing’ etiquette exudes control and confidence. By contrast, poor body language undermines the message one is trying to communicate and, unfortunately, this is what audiences tend to remember. Every virtual meeting must therefore be intentionally charismatic.

Almost as important as communication is flexibility — the ability to adapt to dynamic situations and manage changes during times of both calm and crisis. Flexibility is one of the most sought-after traits, with utility across all disciplines, and highly useful for transitioning between organisations. Going with the flow might seem simple enough, but in practice it is hard to detach from the hard skills we have learned and focus on a new effort mid-stream. Nevertheless, without the ability to innovate, make rational decisions without knowing all the facts, improvise and adapt to evolving situations, EM/BC efforts are far more likely to fail.

Flexibility is vital because it guides the fundamentals of ‘what to do’ and allows for realistic decisions to be made. It is not, however, a substitute for planning; rather, it is something to build into one’s plans. It is critical to ensure plans and processes are not so prescriptive that they fail the instant they encounter an ‘anomaly’ that invalidates the plan; to paraphrase Dwight Eisenhower and Winston Churchill, no plan survives its first contact with reality.⁶

Flexibility can and must be developed through practice. An EM/BC professional should have a colleague test their response to scenarios that are as complex and dynamic as possible so that their strategy

evolves and their flexibility improves. Of all the soft skills, flexibility may be the one that requires the most diligence to perfect.

Leadership and teamwork soft skills should likewise be developed through training and personal practice. EM/BC competencies are often viewed like insurance — no one reads the policy until absolutely necessary. Being a strong leader, however, requires a willingness to break that perception — to engage with those who will execute the plans and ensure that they bond as a team. Leadership must be methodical and deliberate — foster relationships, communicate well, and understand your audience. If you do not feel you can ‘own the room’, take courses in becoming a stronger leader and understand that asking a mentor for assistance is not a sign of weakness, but of leadership itself.

Successful leadership is achieved when the parties being asked to work together not only trust their counterparts, but also the EM/BC professional. The subject matter expert who only checks in with their teams during or immediately after a crisis has not fostered the key component of being a good teacher and counsellor. Regardless of whether one is able to travel or can only meet virtually or via phone, it is critical to establish a rapport with the teams who will be the boots on the ground executing the hard skills they have been taught. The further one is removed from the reality on the ground, the harder it is to set realistic goals.

Building strong leadership also involves determining who will be the critical leaders or subject matter experts in a crisis — an EM/BC professional who has developed strong leadership skills will be willing to take on the role of mentoring other senior leaders, directing and guiding them to perform critical tasks while also taking on a support role to assist in the training and team development. Whether

one is the primary team leader or a support element, it is imperative to get to know all stakeholders well before a crisis — the professionals on the legal and HR teams, the communication experts — and to ensure that these subject matter experts all know what everyone brings to the table.

Demonstrating leadership does not mean gathering a group together, throwing an exercise at them, and running it blindly. One must lead the team into the proverbial battle slowly; ensure they are properly equipped with documentation, guides and resources; then build their capabilities further until they can walk or run on their own. Why? Because if these colleagues know and trust you, then when things hit the proverbial fan, they will listen to your guidance and know the materials you provide them are critical for their own success.

Shifting to a more innate soft skill, responsibility basically boils down to taking action when needed. But despite this more innate nature — a sense of duty that few courses can teach — it is still a skill that can be honed and developed. It is the role of the EM/BC professional to care enough to take responsibility for ensuring hazards and vulnerabilities are anticipated and mitigated; and that plans to respond and recover are in place and ready to reduce human and infrastructure loss. EM/BC professionals that do not care enough to understand the gravity of their own responsibilities can never truly develop this skill.

Finally, one cannot overlook the positive impact that problem-solving and decisiveness can have on crisis outcomes. A proper problem-solving technique entails taking a staged approach of defining the problem, gathering information on the problem, considering the alternatives, deciding which to implement,⁷ and then having the wherewithal to stick with that

decision. During an incident or a crisis, it is common for people to ‘freeze up’ — a physiological reaction that directly alters the respiration and heart rate, leading to a form of denial or inability to accept that what is happening is real. A trained EM/BC professional should recognise these effects and be able to mitigate them using their hard skills. Still, the very nature of a crisis is ambiguity, lack of knowledge and conflicting information. The inability to think on one’s feet and come up with a plan, even if it is not watertight, can be disastrous. Ensuring one is not stumped when the plan does not work out as intended, but instead being willing to overcome the resulting problem, however complex, is the hallmark of a good practitioner. Perhaps unsurprisingly, these soft skills benefit greatly from flexibility.

It is a fallacy to imagine that anyone can flex their soft skills successfully in a crisis scenario without developing them first. Indeed, just as crisis management teams are asked to prepare for the inevitable crisis over the horizon, so too must the EM/BC professional address the gaps in their soft skills during ‘peace time’. It is thus critically important that EM/BC professionals encourage their organisations to invest in their soft skills. Ensuring a budget includes line items for professional conferences, where not only are soft skills discussed and debated, but where seasoned professionals provide interactive exercises to develop soft skills, is paramount for the EM/BC professional to add value to their organisation. Leadership must be made aware that training and mentoring EM/BC professionals in soft skills competencies leads to both internal and external successes, like international certifications that drive brand value to customers, but which also serve to protect the brand. A crisis team that solves an incident due in part to a well versed and soft-skill competent EM/BC professional is a win for the organisation

beyond the tangible impacts of the crisis mitigated.

No discussion of soft skills development is complete without touching on the fact that many EM/BC professionals work in organisations where they may not be the primary leader during a crisis, but rather a key source of support to the senior executives who are leading the organisation's response. In these instances, the development of soft skills is doubly important as EM/BC professionals must be sufficiently proficient to mentor the senior leader and coach them in how to guide the organisation through the crisis. Such a role will draw heavily on the EM/BC professional's communication, leadership and flexibility skills, as the support they provide to the senior leader is not only vital to the success of the organisation's response in the broader sense, but they must also be prepared for the senior leader to defer to them to guide the day-to-day response.

SOFT SKILLS IN CRISIS

Having outlined the key soft skills, and how to grow them, it is critically important to understand the pitfalls and positives of utilising or failing to utilise soft skills in real-world scenarios. In what follows, the examples are broken down into the key soft skills discussed above.

Communication

Communication, as noted, is one of the most basic but most powerful skills — people rely on it every day in their personal and professional lives, but effective communication is harder than people give it credit. The example of the BP Deepwater Horizon oil spill in the spring of 2010 provides a case in point. When BP CEO Tony Hayward spoke about the spill, he initially stated 'the Gulf of Mexico is a very big ocean. The amount of volume

of oil and dispersant we are putting into it is tiny in relation to the total water volume', adding that deep-water drilling would continue in the country despite the growing environmental and political backlash, as 'Apollo 13 did not stop the space race ... neither did the Air France [2009] plane [crash off the coast of Brazil] stop the world airline industry flying people around the world. It's the same for the oil industry'.⁸ Pressured about his seemingly crass statements, Hayward inexplicably said, 'You know, I'd like my life back',⁹ causing BP's public image to be further tarnished as protests sprung up at BP petrol stations across the USA¹⁰ until Hayward finally resigned.

BP's failure to understand the power of communication, to have prepared to utilise it properly, set off an immense chain reaction that helped wipe billions off the company's stock market value. The foundation for communication during the crisis was poor from the outset and was weakened further by the company's lack of empathy and control of the message. There was a total failure to acknowledge the problem and a weak attempt to write off the issue as inconsequential. While normally over-communicating is better than under-communicating, this incident proved the exception to the rule.

Flexibility

The COVID-19 pandemic has become the ultimate exercise in flexibility for the EM/BC profession — appearing in late 2019 and achieving pandemic status in March 2020, it has subsequently taken a winding path. Many EM/BC professionals burned the midnight oil in the first few days and weeks of the pandemic, figuring out how to adapt to rules and regulations that were changing on an almost hourly basis. How best to get one's personnel back from travel, safely and within the law, proved just as difficult as

navigating the murky waters of, in many cases, shifting entire workforces to remote working while maintaining some semblance of productivity.

As 2020 dragged into 2021, the end looked near and EM/BC professionals began to turn their sights towards what lessons had been learned for the next pandemic, while persistent issues that had been overshadowed by the global health crisis — terrorism, civil war and natural disasters — resurfaced and moved to the forefront of strategic planning. Unfortunately, nature is unpredictable — the delta variant surged and EM/BC professionals had to evaluate whether to re-implement work-from-home plans, whether businesses that had returned to the office needed to reassess their policies, and whether their plans in general remained plausible, all while dealing with a surge in the various other crises that constantly loom large.

The need to remain agile continues to this day, as governments have implemented vaccination mandates; criminal elements have shifted their focus to cyber attacks to create new continuity issues; and the supply chain continues to be vexed. With these problems looking like they will extend into 2022, and quite possibly beyond, EM/BC professionals must think not only about today but about the crises yet to come, ensuring their plans remain current and their teams remain attuned to the latest issues.

Leadership/teamwork

In January 2021, a lack of teamwork and leadership in Washington, DC failed to prevent the first invasion of the US Capitol since 1812. According to reports sourced by the *New York Times*,^{11–13} emergency management professionals in the federal government and the government of the District of Columbia were not communicating with each other or sharing information in the days before the rallies

took place, despite copious evidence on various social media platforms that the rallies might have a violent element to them. Subsequently, during the rally itself, poor relationships between the DC government, US Capitol police, Department of Defense and the White House led to desperate pleas for help going unheeded for hours. EM/BC planners were forced to spin up response elements with little to no warning, all while limited forces on the ground received conflicting information on how to best counter the assault with inferior numbers facing a strongly determined and violent element.

While one cannot solely place the blame for the lack of preparation on leadership alone, one of the root causes was poor relationships to begin with. Had any of the multitude of agencies been willing to plan for the worst, the disaster would likely have been mitigated. It is difficult to speculate whether EM/BC planners were given the proper leeway one might expect (the book is still to be written, pending US Congress's investigation into the incident), but knowing the chaos officials were reportedly facing, desperately making calls for help, it is certain that prior teamwork would have eliminated some of the risks.

Responsibility

In today's world of technology, change is part and parcel of the EM/BC professional's job. Even in such seemingly mundane activities as standard policy updates or server upgrades, change carries inherent risk as it can lead to negative downstream impacts on other services. During the Amazon Web Services (AWS) outage in November 2020, one of the 23 AWS regional sectors was brought down by a small change in an internal Amazon product. Unfortunately, that sector hosted a number of other internet services, consumer products (like Prime Music, Ring and Roku TV), and various internet of

things servers, leading to a massive negative impact for businesses and consumers.¹⁴ AWS, however, took responsibility for the outage, pinpointing the issue on its internal teams' attempts to add a small bit of capacity to an internal product called Kinesis,¹⁵ which overwhelmed the shared servers and caused a cascading blackout. This seemingly routine change overflowed into a massive consumer outage. AWS' reputation was not harmed by the outage, as the company took responsibility, owned the issue, found the root cause and rectified the situation. Taking responsibility here was essential because it lessened the likelihood of further impacts to the infrastructure and the company's reputation.

Problem solving/decisiveness

Despite everything previously discussed, equipping the EM/BC professional's toolbox with a wide variety of soft skills cannot be a substitute for challenging oneself to utilise problem-solving abilities and take decisive actions. The Bali Mount Agung Volcano explosion in 2017, for example, had not really been on the radar of the present authors chiefly because their company did not operate out of an active volcano zone. However, when the volcano exploded, two employees notified the security team that they were stuck in Bali. This left two choices: the company could either say, 'sorry, best of luck' or take action to assist those employees, despite knowing that it had done no preparation and had no safety net or action plan. It was determined that the best course of action, and the only morally right one, was to shift from observing a crisis to solving one. Simply put, while companies do not necessarily have a duty of care to their employees when they are not on company business, they do have a duty *to* care. A third-party global security provider was therefore engaged to determine what assets were available, and as the airport

ground to a halt, an evacuation plan was put in motion. Although the initial plan fell apart within hours, by drawing on the team's flexibility and communication skills, it was possible to develop a new course of action and communicate this to both the security provider and the personnel. There was no time for the company to waiver in its intent, and although the situation continued to evolve until the personnel were safely on flights home, the ability to take decisive action produced the desired result — bringing employees home despite difficult odds.

BEYOND THE DEVELOPMENT OF SOFT SKILLS

EM/BC professionals must take every opportunity to hone their craft. For example, delivering training sessions should not be seen as an imposition, but rather as an opportunity to improve one's presentation skills and become a more confident communicator. What is more, training teams makes them stronger and, in turn, makes the EM/BC professional more capable of imparting knowledge to those same teams in the future.

There are also many great tools and programmes available to help build soft skills. For example, MIT's Executive Education programme offers courses on soft skills with access to an array of journal articles on topics such as how to improve one's soft skills,¹⁶ how to host a successful meeting remotely¹⁷ and how to identify one's soft skills.¹⁸ However, although these are fantastic tools to have in the toolbox, nothing is as effective as finding someone with a keen sense of their own soft skills and engaging them as a mentor to improve your abilities.

If we are disciplined enough to do the small things correctly, we will be disciplined enough to get things right in a crisis.

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