



A Window Into the Role of a CHEMTREC Crisis Management Consultant

July 2021

When a person is engaged in crisis management, the amygdala kicks into action. The amygdala is the “old brain,” we share it with primates and it is responsible for the perception of emotions such as anger, fear, and sadness, as well as the controlling of aggression. The amygdala helps to store memories of events and emotions so that an individual may be able to recognize similar events in the future. The amygdala gets sensory information before the information reaches the cortex and causes conscious awareness of the sensation. The amygdala might also be described as our automatic brain; it is our system 1.

Wait, what? Neuroscience lessons? Well, not quite, we’re not neuroscience experts, but bear with me here, I’ll get back to the amygdala in due course. My immediate point is that when one thinks about crisis management, the immediate image that may come to mind likely involves fires, explosions, bombs, or other dramatic scenarios with the potential to have major impacts on people, environment, assets, and reputation.

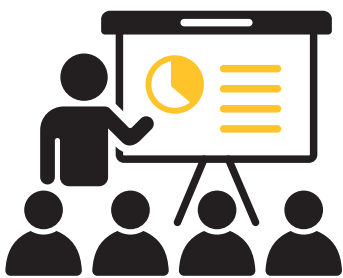
It’s Tuesday May 6th and I drive the roughly 40-mile journey from my house across the Cotswold’s, a national park and area of outstanding natural beauty. Picture post card villages are nestled throughout its undulating topography. I’ve always felt it is a rather unexpected location to host the United Kingdom’s Fire and Rescue Service College, where since 1966, it has provided leadership, management, and advanced operational training courses for senior fire officers from the United Kingdom and foreign fire authorities. It is a huge site spanning 500 acres, with accommodations for over 1,000 people, on-site

dining facilities, training rooms, gym, swimming pool and so on, not unlike a huge college campus.

I meet up with my colleague, Gareth Black, to embark upon a three-day incident command program for some of the UK's most senior fire and rescue service personnel. A group of men and woman whose lives are often consumed by their demanding day jobs. They are here to demonstrate their worth as they embark upon three days of rigorous learning, ending with an assessment in front of leading specialists in incident command, Gareth, and myself!

The assessment is set up to allow delegates to demonstrate their ability and capacity to command high level, high pressure, and stressful incidents. Some of the mock scenarios involve train derailments involving hundreds of casualties, plane crashes, schools on fires, and so on. However, Gareth and I are here to offer a twist, a newer concept to the UK blue light agencies. As I said in the opening gambit, it's not all about dramatic explosions, but about the ability of the people and the human mind—the 'psychology of command.'

Gareth and I have a combined total of 40 years of experience in and around the field of incident command, and we have learned not to rely solely on plans and procedures (whilst I'm quick to acknowledge that plans and procedures are vitally important), but to also focus on the people that make this happen. The stress placed upon humans who are tasked with commanding such incidents can be enormous and can cause fascinating responses in humans, it can make people think act and feel very differently than their usual personas.



We start the program with a 4–5-hour presentation; what! A 5 HOUR PRESENTATION? I hear you all shout. Well, this is not typical. It may be best described as a 4 or 5-hour exploration session that reveals fascinating insights into the human mind and divulges a plethora of thoughts around how we act as humans when placed in very stressful situations.

A key skill you should have for dealing with such a delicate subject matter is creating a welcoming learning environment which allows people to open up.

The session is flexible and adaptable, we allow the exploration of tangents (with at least a certain degree of relevance) and we encourage the delegates to express themselves openly and honestly.

The conversations are supported by our PowerPoint presentation to keep us on topic. We start the session with what I'd call a good warm up, exploring current statistics and case studies that dictate the levels of stress that many of us often face in our lives on a day-to-day basis, let alone the rigors of their job and role. When we start to overlay the participant's day-to-day business of saving lives, which might involve retrieving bodies from burning buildings, or trying to save children from a collision wreck, we quickly ascertain just how stressful life for our fire and rescue service personnel can be. It is the fusion of the two elements 'life and the job,' which is a mixing pot of potentially volatile ingredients. Yet, amidst these challenges, it is one person's job to command the overall action, the role of the 'Incident Commander.'

I move on to explain that incident command is generally not a natural act for humans, it pushes them to an area of leadership and thought process that we, as humans, are normally at our most uncomfortable by default. This is often one of the most enjoyed and fascinating sessions for our course delegates. It creates healthy debate, sometimes robust debate, and robust debate is what we hope for!

Giving delegates some comfort and helping them understand that feeling pressure and ultimately, a certain level of stress is perfectly normal, can be a real eye opener for them. Often, they visibly relax from that moment on. It can be a game changer!

Gareth then steps in and talks about the effects of stress. Stress can impact the brain, affect everything we do, and can push us to think intuitively, or use 'easy thinking,' also known as system 1, when we should generally be using rational thought processes, also known as system 2.

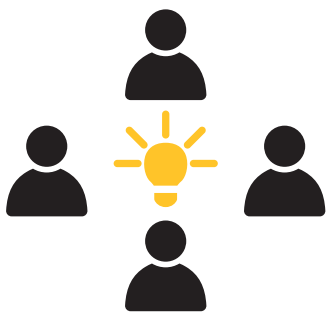


As I said earlier, we're not neuroscientists, nor are we psychologists. When we present, we break it down in bite sized chunks with Gareth's delivery of activities and analogies to engage our course delegates. Who wouldn't be fascinated about a realization that you are only human after all and the job that you're being asked to do comes with an element of stress that you're going to have to deal with and manage? What is most fascinating is that this stress manifests itself in many ways and we all cope with it differently.

In next segment, I take course delegates on a journey of self-awareness and seek to further cement the understanding that we are all different, that's why we all do things differently. This generally helps to further "break the ice" between the students (most of whom have only just met for the first time today). I highlight this through my favorite model of situational awareness, adapted from Dr. Mica Endsleigh, a leading scholar on

non-technical skillsets and situational awareness. I break Dr. Endsleigh's model down to show that individuals' perception, comprehension, and projections during high-pressure situations will be different, because we each have very different mental models upon which to draw our experiences from and we each have very different knowledge, skills, and experiences. Hence, when it comes to commanding an incident, we will normally see very different methodologies and styles being used to achieve the common aim. It's all about confidence building through self-realization.

Gareth then delivers a session we call 'balancing mice not elephants,' a particular favorite of mine, where we explore and discuss truths about human's inability to rationalize stress and make the stress response balance the stressor. Unlike a zebra in the savanna who may be chased by a lion, with a proper stress response, "I run and escape or be eaten alive," humans often continually worry and become stressed about a huge array of issues, from things we did last year, last week, next week or next year. The response to that stress is not in balance, and this can impact our ability to command incidents effectively too!



The session ends with discussions around how we can manage this more effectively, how we can stop this spilling into our personal lives and vice-versa. I share with the participants that I spent 11 years in the field of human intelligence alongside my crisis management work and have experience in interpreting body language traits when under pressure. I will observe each of the delegates over the next 48 hours. Essentially, we will be watching the delegates perform in response to high-pressure

realistic scenarios. While news of the observation step is usually met with mixed reactions, delegates ultimately tend to enjoy and embrace the feedback we give.

On day two, we watch, we observe, we make notes, we laugh, and we are in awe of how people are able to manage complex incidents. The ability to make sense of chaos, disseminate massive amounts of information, prioritizing what matters now and what can be saved for later and how to manage sometimes huge gaps in information. After all, humans tend to despise gaps in information, also known as confabulation, if there's a gap in information our brains seek to fill it, more often than not subconsciously, because the picture looks better to our minds if it's complete. The fact that we often fill that gap with anything that seems to fit is the real problem and the entire picture can quickly become distorted as a result. Avoiding filling in that gap prematurely is what Gareth and I have termed 'learning to be comfortable with being uncomfortable,' and it is a critical incident command trait to learn and use.

On day three, after an early rise and some black coffee, we meet with the students again for another 3-hour session. We are well armed with notebooks full of important observations to help improve their incident command approaches, and maybe even their lives.

We begin by reminding the delegates that the feedback is not intended to be negative, but is in fact often the polar opposite. For example, when exposed to even a small amount of pressure, there are some people who appear to go bright red. This is often confused by those experiencing or observing this as a sign the person is suffering from pure embarrassment. This in turn can feed a person's anxiety, as they reflect and think to themselves, 'Oh gosh, I'm going to go bright red here. I know I am.' In fact, turning red is a human response to stress. The body produces histamine when we're stressed and our internal systems heat up, like an internal thermostat being attacked and unregulated by our stress response. It normally starts with patches around the neck, cheeks, and ears before attacking the entire face. But hang on, this is a display of how hard your brain is working to achieve a goal, and the goal here typically involves saving lives. So, going red in the face can be an amazing, impressive trait for those who know and understand what it really means.



The session can be filled with enough material to fill a body language best seller book. Observations like: 'Why did you click your pen 57 times in 2 mins when being asked about missing people?' 'Why did you develop a stammer when quizzed by the paparazzi?' 'Why do you bounce up and down on the balls of your feet without realizing?' 'Why did you take your glasses on and off 57 times during a 6-minute meeting?' 'Why do you pull at your belt buckle in an awkward manner throughout the entire scenario, yet you haven't touched it once since?' and the classic, 'Why has your mouth gone so dry that your tongue appears to be fixed to the roof of your mouth?' Why did you do so many odd things when, in normal life mode, you don't do any of these things?

The truth of the matter often rests on the incredible knowledge skills and experiences of the participants. Many show an acumen to effectively apply non-technical skillsets to their incident command scenarios. That said, because they are human, it can come at a price, such as mental fatigue and other stress factors.

And just like that, the three days are over. It's fascinating to me every time; we keep learning more and we love going back.

Incident command is a subject matter that we all may wish to visit, even if for you, it is not part of your everyday life and job description.