

The Secret of Exercise D-N-C revealed.

Exercise D-N-C was held on the afternoon of the first day of Cape Disaster Debrief 2004. The exercise was an experiment in adding value to conferences, and provided a steep learning curve, to both organizers and participants.

The exercise scenario, written with a bit of twisted humour by John Brown from Cape Town Disaster Management, included a luxury passenger ship alight in a very busy V&A Waterfront, and a passenger aircraft dropping an engine onto a chemical factory with resultant toxic releases before crash-landing at Cape Town International Airport.

As part of the exercise, a joint operations centre (JOC) was established in the main conference room, with radio links to three separate forward co-ordination points on the scenes of the three major incidents. For the purposes of the exercise these were three individuals with prompt-cards and radios in the City of Cape Town Mobile JOC which was parked just outside the conference room. From the JOC communications lines were also established with “control centers” of the various responding disciplines, which included the SAPS, public and private EMS, Fire Services, Traffic, the SANDF, and private security organisations. Each service representative in the JOC had to talk back to his or her control centre, and also receive information from and provide information to the on-site co-ordination points. The GEMC3 Disaster Information Management System provided a real-time picture of the developing situation on electronic maps that were projected for everyone to see. Video feeds provided the audience in the conference room with a view of what was happening in the “control rooms”, and running commentary was provided to keep the audience up to date on what information the JOC was receiving and what decisions it was making.

Conference delegates who were willing to participate were given roles outside their normal sphere of responsibilities through a random draw, and in some cases the exercise participants were changed in mid-exercise, with a hand-over of the chairpersonship of the JOC from Peter Daniels (Cape Town Disaster Management) to Pat Reid (Pat Reid Consulting) being one of many critical points in the exercise which had to be managed by the participants. Delegates were exposed to both the creative chaos and the calculated process which is inherent in the tense atmosphere of a joint operations centre dealing with a crisis.

Although the exercise was a great opportunity for learning, the organizers have identified several shortcomings that, if addressed, will make similar exercises even more valuable to participants. Watch this space for Cape Disaster Debrief 2005!

The meaning of D-N-C has been a closely guarded secret from before the Cape Disaster Debrief 2004, and remained one throughout the conference and up until now. As a last reward to all the participants who shared this intense experience with us, we can now reveal that D-N-C stands for “Deliberate Non-Catastrophe”, which implies that if it is well-managed, a disaster will not become a catastrophe. Is it not our shared passion to deliberately keep disasters from becoming catastrophes?

-Johan Minnie