

Five questions organisations must ask when reacting to surprises

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There are five key questions to ask when adapting to surprise situations in business, according to Samer Faraj, Canada Research Chair in Technology, Management and Healthcare at Desautels Faculty of Management, McGill University.

The researchers examined police data from an infamous 2011 murder – where a Dutch criminal was shot whilst under surveillance, but the assailant evaded capture due to police failings – to highlight the challenges of adaptability in high intensity situations.

The researchers concluded that organisations have difficulty mounting a rapid response, in this case from surveillance of a suspect to arresting his murderers, because the sudden turn of events exposed coordination problems that can doom an organisation's ability to shift gear. They identify five questions organisations must ask to better prepare for sudden changes in situation:

1. Does the team have the correct skills to do this? Be certain about co-ordination and communication.
2. Is everyone up to speed? Avoid failure by correctly reporting updates.
3. Are we communicating by the same means? Ensure that using complex technology or more than one communication method doesn't cause delays or confusion.
4. Could moving people to make the team more effective? Navigate differences between specialities and maximise the skills of your team.
5. Are procedures in place for errors or surprises? Prepare for unforeseen circumstantial problems or errors.

Faraj says: "Our research examined a high-profile case which showcased the difficulties in coordination faced by a large multidisciplinary police team in a fast-paced environment. When confronted with a sudden need to switch practices from the surveillance of a known criminal to the arrest of unknown suspects who shot him, the team faced stubborn coordination difficulties in reconnecting with each other, synchronizing knowledge flows, recomposing the team, reconfiguring their technology and adjusting to the field conditions. Although some of these challenges could possibly benefit from cross-specialty training and by making additional resources available, others occurred from blatant error and miscommunication."

Faraj continues: "Fast response organisations, such as hospitals, fire and police departments, spend an inordinate amount of time and resources preparing for unexpected events. They pride themselves in operating in high risk environments. Yet businesses are often less equipped to respond to mistakes like this, made in high intensity situations despite in-depth training. Practical agility within these circumstances goes far beyond being able to solve problems and recalibrate under pressure, and can be narrowed down to five main categories of potential error. It's important that these are addressed within the world of business if organisations want to maximise their performances."

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