



RHEM

Riem Human Expertise Management

WHITEPAPER · CRISIS MANAGEMENT

Crisis-proof in 24 hours: a practical guide

How organisations prepare for the unexpected
and limit reputational damage in the first day.

INTRODUCTION

Why the first day decides everything

Any organisation can face a crisis. A cyberattack that halts production, a product fault that forces a recall, an incident that is on social media within the hour. The event itself is rarely the biggest problem. What makes the difference is how fast and how clearly decisions are made in the first 24 hours.

That day sets the tone: who takes charge, which facts are established, what goes out and what deliberately does not. Organisations that have rehearsed this recover measurably faster. Organisations that improvise lose time, trust and often people.

What you will read in this whitepaper

- Why decision-making under pressure works fundamentally differently from line management.
- Four steps towards a crisis organisation that holds: risks, plan, exercise, improvement.
- An hour-by-hour view of the first day, with the pitfalls of each phase.
- Practical examples from industry, healthcare and public safety.
- Five questions to test today how prepared you genuinely are.

THE PROBLEM

Pressure rises faster than preparation

1 hour

Typical window in which an incident is public before the first internal picture is complete.

4 hours

Realistic standard for standing up a crisis team with mandate and a shared situational picture.

24 hours

The day in which tone, control and credibility for the entire response are set.

Three developments reinforce each other. Digital disruption is increasing: ransomware no longer hits only IT, it halts production, logistics and clinical processes. News travels faster than the internal fact check: a staff photo on social media arrives before the first situation report. And stakeholder expectations have shifted — regulators, customers and media no longer accept silence, not even in the first hour.

Meanwhile preparation in most organisations is paper. There is a plan, there are roles, there is a call tree. But the team that will sit in the crisis room has never worked together under pressure, mandates are not explicit, and incoming information is too much rather than too little. The result: decisions wait for a consensus that never arrives.

This is not about the quality of people. It is about experience. Deciding with incomplete information, under time pressure, with personal consequences, is a skill that only develops through realistic rehearsal.

These timeframes are experience-based benchmarks from exercises and deployments RHEM supports; they are guidance, not official statistics.

The first day, phase by phase

Four phases, each with one dominant pitfall.

0-1 hour	Signal and sense-making. Pitfall: waiting for confirmation while the story already circulates. Decide who is in charge and start the timeline.
1-4 hours	Escalation. Pitfall: a team without mandate. Confirm authority, set up one information flow and issue the first holding statement.
4-12 hours	Control. Pitfall: information overload. Limit the situational picture to what changes a decision; separate facts, assumptions and questions.
12-24 hours	Endurance. Pitfall: no relief planned. Establish rhythm, staffing and accountability for the days that follow.

INSIGHTS AND SOLUTIONS

Four steps to a crisis-resilient organisation

Preparation is not a document but a cycle. These four steps form the core of every engagement RHEM leads.

Step 1 — Identify the risks that genuinely hit you

Do not start from a generic risk list, but from the scenarios that halt your primary process or damage your credibility.

- **Risk analysis:** which disruptions are plausible, and which combinations have never been thought through?
- **Impact assessment:** what does an hour, a day, a week of downtime cost in continuity, safety and trust?
- **Stakeholder mapping:** who must you reach within the first hour, and who must not hear it from the media?

Test: if you can name three scenarios you have never exercised, you have found your priority.

Step 2 — Build a plan that enables decisions

A good crisis plan describes authority, not procedure. The answer to 'who may decide this now' must be available in seconds.

- **Roles and responsibilities:** a crisis team with named deputies and round-the-clock availability.
- **Escalation procedures:** explicit thresholds — when does the duty manager escalate to the executive?
- **Communication protocols:** pre-agreed spokespersonship, holding statements and one channel for staff.
- **Mandate card:** one page stating who decides what, up to which limit and on what information.

Step 3 — Exercise until it becomes uncomfortable

An exercise is not a demonstration of what already works. If everyone sails through it, it delivered nothing.

- **Crisis simulations:** realistic scenarios with counterplay, time pressure and incomplete information.
- **Tabletop exercises:** short and frequent, aimed at the decisions the team finds hard.
- **Evaluation:** judge the quality of decisions, not whether the format was followed.
- **Executive participation:** the board exercises too, not only the operation.

Step 4 — Improve continuously

Lessons that do not land in behaviour or documents are not lessons but minutes.

- **Lessons learned:** a maximum of three improvements per exercise, each with an owner and a date.
- **Monitoring:** track the threat picture, chain dependencies and staff changes in crisis roles.
- **Updating:** revise plans after every deployment, reorganisation or chain change — not annually out of habit.

FROM PRACTICE

What preparation actually delivers

Three anonymised examples, composed from engagements RHEM supported.

International manufacturer — cyberattack halts production

A ransomware attack stopped two production sites. Because roles, escalation thresholds and spokespersonship had been agreed and rehearsed, the crisis team was operational with mandate within four hours, customers and the regulator were informed the same day, and the executive could focus on continuity instead of coordination.

The gain was not technical; it was the authority to decide, assigned in advance.

Hospital — escalating while care continues

During a prolonged outage of clinical systems the bottleneck was not the fallback procedure but the question of who could allocate scarcity while the same doctors were needed at the bedside. Making mandates explicit and rehearsing scarcity decisions reduced the time to a supported decision considerably.

A crisis organisation only works if it holds alongside the primary process.

Public body — political and operational pressure at once

In an incident with public impact the political pressure arrived before the operational picture. Rehearsing one shared decision language between operations and the executive removed the double decision circuit that had slowed earlier responses.

One line from the operations room to the board table saves hours in the first day.

CONCLUSION

Crisis management begins long before the crisis

Organisations that invest in preparation, training and clear authority respond faster, limit damage and recover measurably better. Not because they predicted the scenario, but because their decision process has already been under pressure once.

The question is therefore not whether you have a crisis plan. It is whether your people have ever genuinely made the decisions it contains.

Five questions to ask today

- Does everyone know within a minute who is in charge — including on a Sunday night?
- Can we have a crisis team with mandate operational within four hours?
- Is there a holding statement that could go out today without edits?
- When did our board last make a crisis decision itself, in an exercise?
- Have the improvements from the last exercise demonstrably been implemented?

NEXT STEP

Take the Crisis Quick Scan

In a twenty-minute conversation with Melvin Riem we go through how your decision-making is organised and where pressure will show first. You receive a short written summary of the findings.

Request the free quick scan at rhem.eu

Schedule a no-obligation advisory conversation

Have a tailored crisis simulation designed for your board or crisis team

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