

# CRISIS RESPONSE

VOL:16 | ISSUE:2 | JUNE 2021

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JOURNAL

Protection Prevention Preparedness Response Resilience Recovery



## CLIMATE FIXES? CALLS FOR GLOBAL GOVERNANCE

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Crisis Response Journal is published quarterly; it is available by subscription in hard copy or digital.  
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Published by Crisis Management Limited, Sodes Place Farm, Westcott Road, Dorking RH4 3EB, UK  
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Printed in England by The Manson Group, UK  
ISSN 1745-8633

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contents

<b>News</b> .....	<b>4</b>	<b>Covid-19</b>	<b>32</b>
<b>Comment</b>		<b>India's second wave of Covid-19</b> .....	<b>32</b>
<b>Is home-working really the answer?</b> .....	<b>8</b>	Dr Peter Patel provides an in-depth update of the worsening situation in India	
<b>Analysis</b>		<b>Tourism through a safe corridor</b> .....	<b>36</b>
<b>The rise of resistance</b> .....	<b>12</b>	I Hakan Yilmaz explores Turkey's options for restarting international travel	
Enhancing capability of in-country INGO staff can help them to develop a resistance mindset, says Andrew Brown		<b>Risk, Resilience &amp; Leadership</b>	
<b>Turning potential disaster into sensation</b> ...	<b>16</b>	<b>Cross-training</b> .....	<b>38</b>
Dóra Hjálmsdóttir outlines safety precautions to make the volcanic eruption on Iceland's Reykjanes peninsula safe for residents and visitors		Robert Fagan describes the advantages of developing employees' skills so that they can perform multiple roles, if necessary	
<b>Climate</b>		<b>C-suites and crises</b> .....	<b>40</b>
<b>What is nature's worth?</b> .....	<b>20</b>	C-suite executives can be a help or a hindrance, says Eric McNulty, providing steps that can be taken to ensure they are an asset	
Claire Sanders speaks to Professor Sir Partha Dasgupta about his research on the economics of biodiversity		<b>It's all a matter of risk</b> .....	<b>44</b>
<b>Solar radiation modification</b> .....	<b>22</b>	Emily Hough talks to Michele Wucker about her new book, exploring trust, agency and understanding our own risk relationships	
Janos Pasztor outlines the pros and cons of an approach to help cool the planet to help bring carbon dioxide emissions under control, saying that now is the time for discussions around governance		<b>The very real risks of reputation</b> .....	<b>46</b>
<b>Nature-based solutions</b> .....	<b>26</b>	Massimo Pani shares his research on reputational risk to provide practical advice for organisations	
The ecosystem-based approach is gaining traction says Haseeb Md Irfanullah, but now is the time for action		<b>Crisis management is about people</b> .....	<b>50</b>
<b>Time to prepare</b> .....	<b>28</b>	Thomas Lahntaler explains why we should focus on people rather than situations when crises strike	
Alice C Hill and Madeline Babin urge communities to make investments now to improve preparedness against the growing number of unfamiliar events that climate change is bringing about		<b>Security &amp; Cyber</b>	
		<b>Shining a spotlight on security culture</b> .....	<b>52</b>
		The aviation sector needs to prioritise a security culture. Nina Smith elaborates	
		<b>Nefarious actors building back better</b> .....	<b>56</b>
		It is not only legitimate organisations that are building back better, warns Andy Blackwell, malicious actors also have plans	

**Cross-training p38**



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**Malicious actors p56**



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<b>The rise of religious hatred</b> .....	<b>60</b>	<b>Healthcare workers and Covid-19</b> .....	<b>82</b>
Andrew Staniforth and David Fortune introduce an EU-funded project aimed at protecting Europe's places of worship		Erik de Soir relates the experiences of nurses in emergency and intensive care medicine in Belgium to provide insights into the psychosocial effects of a pandemic outbreak	
<b>What's our next normality?</b> .....	<b>64</b>	<b>Search &amp; Rescue</b>	
Lina Kolesnikova focuses on the next normal and how aspects of critical infrastructure are evolving as a consequence		<b>Helping to make SAR effective</b> .....	<b>87</b>
<b>Cybersecurity in critical infrastructure</b> .....	<b>66</b>	PIX4D explores the merits of using drones in time-sensitive missions to save precious time and resources	
Keyaan Williams says engineered and failsafe operations are key to cybersecurity		<b>Strengthening Iran's USAR capacity</b> .....	<b>88</b>
<b>Adversary behaviour in crowded spaces</b> ..	<b>70</b>	Iran already has high quality existing response capabilities, but here our authors describe enhancements made by international co-operation and collaboration	
Mark Chapple reviews how we protect crowded places		<b>Living at risk in a multi-hazard country ...</b>	<b>90</b>
<b>Human-centred thinking</b>		Burcak Basbug reflects on the dynamic disasters that arise in her home country of Turkey, saying that how they are dealt with can be used to immunise society against other risks	
<b>Using the right words</b> .....	<b>73</b>	<b>Communication</b>	
Jeannie Barr from the EPS explains the significance of effective communication and use of vocabulary during emergencies		<b>Revolution or evolution?</b> .....	<b>92</b>
<b>Natural first responders</b> .....	<b>74</b>	Fifth generation technology for mobile networks provides even faster broadband connectivity. But should public safety and mission critical organisations switch to 5G now? Mladen Vratonjić investigates	
When governments work alongside neighbours, caregivers and young people, the whole community's resilience is strengthened, says Marcus T Coleman		<b>Gathering momentum: NextGen 112</b> .....	<b>94</b>
<b>Design to the rescue</b> .....	<b>76</b>	Freddie McBride explores the merits of implementing Next Generation 112 in emergency services communications	
David Wales urges humanitarians and emergency services to explore design processes		<b>Regulars</b>	
<b>A decade of design-led exploration</b> .....	<b>78</b>	<b>Events</b> .....	<b>96</b>
Jonathan Collie shares his research and the results of a design-led journey to discover service gaps in society		<b>Frontline</b> .....	<b>98</b>
<b>The aftermath of disasters</b> .....	<b>80</b>	Lord Martin Rees, Astronomer Royal, speaks to Claire Sanders about his research on existential threats, climate and astrophysics	
Kjell Brataas shares stories of how frontline workers have dealt with grief and trauma during the pandemic			

**Design & society p78**



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**Healthcare workers p82**



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Cover story: Solar Geoengineering, call for governance  
Cover image: Daniel Mitchell

comment

**O**n top of the millions of deaths and protracted health consequences brought about by this pandemic, Covid-19 is a particularly cruel crisis in that it isolates



and deprives people of the comfort they would normally derive from the affirming company of other human beings. As Lyndon Bird says on p8: "We are social animals. We need to get together to share thoughts, feelings, ideas, hopes, and sometimes complaints."

Of course, technology has helped with multiple ways of communicating that were unimaginable just a few years ago. But although many of today's virtual methods of communication are widely viewed as being here to stay, in some circumstances human contact is, quite simply, irreplaceable. Virtual interaction can never fully replicate the complex subtexts and nuanced cues when meeting another person face-to-face.

Words and body language are vital, as described in Jeannie Barr's exploration of communication and vocabulary used during emergencies. The choice of language and tone can be either helpful or detrimental in a crisis (p73).

On p64 Lina Kolesnikova examines how Covid-19 has disrupted working and shopping habits, as well as the ways we access healthcare and information. She says that the very essence of what we define as 'critical' infrastructure is being transformed. This brings new risks in terms of resilience and security, including in the areas of technology we have come to rely upon during Covid-19.

Design is another undervalued but essential piece in the jigsaw of humanitarian and emergency response disciplines. David Wales notes on p76: "As the meeting point between states and communities, public service agencies would greatly benefit from making design a standard approach."

The key lies in understanding people – their culture, fears, concerns, past experiences and predispositions. Michele Wucker calls this an individual's unique risk fingerprint (p44).

All of the above should be combined with a simple shift of focus onto the people dealing with – and affected by – a crisis, says Thomas Lahntaler (p50). Because, above all, we must not forget that crisis management is about people.

# It's all a matter of risk

In this short interview, **Emily Hough** speaks to Michele Wucker about her new book, *You are what you risk*, and discovers that the key to better risk literacy lies in trust, agency and understanding your own relationship with risk

“**T**he world is getting scarier. Often it feels harder and harder to exert control over the risks we face in our daily lives, much less over many of the global risks facing the entire planet. “Like past viruses that ignore national boundaries, the Covid-19 pandemic has raced around the world. Temperatures are rising and weather is becoming more extreme. Scientists warn that we risk the collapses of ecosystems and the life they support. Financial collapse in a single industry or country can create a domino effect across global financial markets. The risk of disruptive new technologies and artificial intelligence has upended industries, changed global trade and employment trends, created deep anxieties over the future of work and increased the potential for the global spread of disinformation and hate speech. Even as inequality among countries shrinks, inequalities within them have risen, leading to political and social instability, distrust in civil institutions, racial tensions, nationalism and protectionism.”

These words from Michele Wucker's new book, *You are what you risk: The new art and science of navigating an uncertain world*, encapsulate the malaise that many people around the world are feeling. But what, if anything, can we do about it? Is it our perception that needs to change, or are there more concrete actions we can take? What of business continuity teams, struggling to make their voices heard in organisations that see this function as a necessary, but ultimately easily ignored asset... until it comes to a crisis? How does trust – in the people around you, institutions, governments and international governance – affect perception of risk? Why do some people avoid risk after major shocks, while for others conquering risk leads them to face more risks? Can we train ourselves to act differently in the face of known risks? What prompts us to change our risk behaviour?

The answers, according to *You are what you risk*, lie in: “The feedback loop between individual risk profiles and the health of the businesses and organisations where they work, and in turn how cultural attitudes and policy ecosystems can make the difference between a healthy economy and society, or one that is teetering on the brink of disaster.”

Wucker explains that the book is a natural progression from the best selling *Gray Rhino: How to recognise and act on the obvious dangers we ignore*, and that it is about: “Finding ways to talk about risk in a way that is relevant to every single one of us.

“We make an estimated 35,000 decisions every day,” she continues. “Every risk is a choice, and every choice is a risk. So that's 35,000 risks a day, but most of the time people don't think about this consciously.”



Michele Wucker, author of *You are what you risk*  
Hal Shipman

*You are what you risk* firmly embraces the strengths that come from transcending traditional boundaries and brings together research in anthropology, journalism, strategy, policy, behavioural psychology, organisational dynamics, policy, sociology, organisational typology and behavioural economics, with a sprinkling of theology and etymology. And of course, economics underpins the whole, but: “I try to downplay that a bit, as I wanted the book to be accessible,” Wucker notes.

Using the Risk Type Compass developed by British psychologist Geoff Trickey, Wucker explains how eight risk personality types can be placed on the 360-degree spectrum of a compass. These include: Excitable; deliberate; intense; composed; adventurous; wary; prudent; and carefree. Yet these types, she contends, are just the starting point. Each person has their own, unique risk fingerprint, which is the combination of their underlying personality disposition, experiences and how they choose to act in a variety of situations. It also extends to the people around them – family, friends, the organisation where they work, their community and broader society. Viewed through this lens, it becomes easier for an individual to assess their personal risk fingerprint, predispositions, attitudes and tendencies.

Organisations have their own risk fingerprints too, emphasises Wucker: “How sensitive is the organisation's culture to risk and things that could go wrong, and how do they even define things that go wrong? This will be different, depending on departmental roles, for example, marketing and legal departments will have very different risk fingerprints.”

It is here that risk empathy is vital, Wucker emphasises. Paying attention to the risk fingerprints of those around you – including other departments – helps to see things from their point of view. In turn, this supports and builds more resilient relationships across cultures, in families, communities and politics.

## Risk empathy

Risk empathy, especially in a business sense, is so important because: “Risk professionals are used to things keeping them up at night,” but they also need to understand their colleagues' concerns about risk and how empowered they feel to do something about it. When Wucker spoke to people working in disaster risk reduction and business continuity, many voiced how difficult it was for them to break out of the organisational silos they have been placed in, and the problems in getting business continuity to be taken as seriously as it should be. “That's one of the reasons I wrote this book,” she says. “I wrote it with lots of business relevance, but it is also addressed at individuals who might not necessarily see themselves as business leaders or who might ‘hate’ business books.

“I hope that it will help people to understand their own risk fingerprint, their organisational risk fingerprint, and then start showing risk empathy towards others... and understand what makes people feel excited enough to pursue a ‘good’ risk – an opportunity – and what motivates them to head off a danger, a ‘bad’ risk.

“When you understand motivations on a team, it becomes easier to mobilise people in the direction you want. My hope is that this book becomes a tool that helps risk management professionals to prepare people well ahead of a crisis, so they are ready. The more we take certain risks and face down other risks, not just dealing with them passively, the more muscles we build and the better we get at doing it.”

In the wider world, however, there is a paradox. Wucker highlights how global threats such as climate, polarisation, toxification of discourse and societal division, among others, are all part of a complex system, and many can seem so overwhelming and potentially catastrophic that people can simply tune them out, focusing instead on areas that they can control. This creeping, world weary paralysis means that: “We can swing wildly between overprotecting ourselves from some risks, ignoring others, and embracing more and more questionable risks,” she comments, and this is symptomatic of a broken relationship with risk, which is widening some of today's most global fault lines: “Not least of which are inequality and the global surge of populism.”

*You are what you risk: The new art and science of navigating an uncertain world* by Michele Wucker, is published by Pegasus Books, ISBN: 978-1-74313-678-3 and can be purchased from bookshops

Whether confronting a pandemic or climate change, the solution lies in understanding risk sensitivity, risk attitude and risk behaviour, and not becoming overwhelmed. “Everybody has to work together to solve a problem,” she says, “businesses, governments and individuals all have a mutually reinforcing role to play.”

In the end, what is risk? Wucker's book says: “Its appearance changes depending on your point of view. Risk can be a danger, an opportunity, or both. Risk is taking a chance: a possibility or an estimated probability. Risk is a muscle. Risk is a privilege. Risk is what you love or what you fear. What you are willing to risk signals your sense of purpose. Every risk is a choice; every choice is a risk.”

It is impossible to do justice to *You are what you risk* in this short interview, which only skims the surface of the deep analysis and reflection that Wucker brings to life with fluent, literary ease. However, one underlying message should resonate far and wide – as human beings we have agency, and liberation from risk paralysis lies in accepting the vulnerability of trying.

## Author

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