

As you may have noticed, ever since the publication of the first part of the BS 25999 standard in 2006, dark, discontented mutterings have been emanating from crisis management specialists. According to Dave Adamson, committee manager for security, risk and business continuity management at the British Standards Institution (BSI), there was always an element of dissatisfaction among some members of the committee that drafted the standard about the failure to address crisis management issues more comprehensively. "There was always discussion about whether 'incident management' encompassed everything," he explains.

In fact, this argument was inherited from discussions that took place prior to the publication of PAS 56, the Publicly Available Specification (PAS) which preceded, and helped pave the way for the standard. Peter Power, managing director at Visor Consultants, was a member of the sub-committee preparing PAS 56 that took the decision to refer to incident, rather than crisis, management. The argument used on that occasion was that use of the word 'crisis' might cause unnecessary panic in some situations. Power says he has always disagreed with that course of action. He is now a member of the crisis management committee developing a PAS for crisis management.

Like Power, Dominic Cockram, managing director at Steelhenge Consulting, believes the term 'crisis management' should definitely be used alongside 'incident management' as a range of terminologies. "The majority of our clients have no issue with calling a crisis a crisis," he says. "In fact, they are worried that if they talk about an 'incident' having occurred, when they are clearly dealing with a crisis, that people will think they aren't taking it seriously."

He refers to the principles used in the UK Gold, Silver and Bronze Command System (developed in

part by Peter Power) to outline the distinctions he thinks need to be made in the PAS: "People need to recognise that you can have an incident, dealt with by an incident response team, and that's the bronze, operational level of response. Then, if that incident becomes a bigger problem, you have a crisis team that will start thinking about things like reputation management. Then, if things escalate further, you go to the

gold level, where people at board level are dealing with such things as external communications to shareholders, the media, and so on. The important thing is to recognise that you can have operational responses, tactical responses and strategic responses. Understanding that escalation process is very important."

Power is keen to point out that the impetus for the PAS has not just

Rules of engagement

The business continuity community is at it again, currently battling over terminology for a potential new crisis management standard. Dave Adams uncovers the opinions of the various parties involved in the development of new rules for managing incidents, or whatever you care to call them



come from malcontents within the business continuity industry, but also from the government, in the shape of the Civil Contingencies Secretariat at the Cabinet Office, which is sponsoring the drafting process, as it did the development of BS 25999. "That shows, I think, that the government is anxious that we get this right," says Power. "We face many different threats and problems, from terrorism and pandemics to flooding and a possible increase in direct action, and we are not necessarily pulling together as quickly and as harmoniously as we should in a crisis."

But progress has not been entirely straightforward. The first problem the Steering Group faces is the need to develop a working definition of a crisis. It's a slippery little problem, says Power. "One of the important things to remember about crisis management is that it is separate to business continuity - that is to say, they are not automatically linked," he explains. "The questions you have to answer in crisis management are all around the initial moments [after a crisis begins] when there are probably more things that you don't know than things you do know. A crisis requires a rapid response

and decision-making in conditions of uncertainty."

Apart from trying to establish a functional and useful terminology, the PAS needs to be a practically applicable document. Power hopes it will help unite what can be, in his phrase, "disconnected, discrete activities that make up the portfolio of corporate resilience".

"The aim of the document is to provide guidelines for the process for an organisation, regardless of its size," he says. "Having said that, the problem if you try and take a 'one size fits all' approach, is that often one size fits all means one size fits nobody. We must avoid that."

He says the aim of the PAS will be to describe the response requirements needed in crisis management, together with supporting information and suggested further reading and recommendations. It will be designed to act as the basis for organisations to develop and implement their own crisis management processes, and should cover all the elements that constitute the process of crisis management, including analysis, training, exercising, rehearsing and testing. It will be aimed at the senior levels of

"The problem if you try and take a 'one size fits all' approach, is that often one size fits all means one size fits nobody. We must avoid that."

management responsible for the implementation of crisis management. It will not be in any way sector-specific, or define the management structures to be used in the event of a crisis.

Cockram highlights the need for a degree of flexibility to take into account the fact that organisational cultures vary so much. "It would be difficult if they came out with very restrictive terminology, because most organisations aren't going to rewrite everything to fit into that box if it doesn't deliver additional operational clarity," he says. "You've got to pull back and not get too lost in the detail. That's a problem, because there's nothing people like to do more, when



they're in that committee environment. But at this stage the secret's going to be keeping it broad, so it can fit all organisations." He is particularly concerned that it should meet with the needs of SMEs as well as larger organisations.

Peter Power believes the committee is moving steadily towards publication of the PAS, and Dave Adamson is sure the PAS will appear in 2009. The official line from the BSI is that the PAS is still in development and that neither the timetable for its publication, nor the exact form of the consultation process has yet been confirmed.

As Adamson explains, a PAS is subject to a far less stringent review process than is a full British Standard: "A PAS is reviewed by around 200 organisations with an active interest in the area, and who they are could be decided based on a lot of different reasons. But they don't seek as long or as wide a consultation as with a British standard. Ultimately, when you're doing a PAS, the steering panel are not bound by the same restrictions as with a standard.

"With a standard you need a

'consensus', defined as a lack of sustained opposition from stakeholders," he continues. "With a PAS the steering panel can just say 'We've done all we can to resolve these disagreements' then go ahead. In fact, it doesn't even have to do that. This has actually been an unusual PAS, because they have tried to involve all the relevant stakeholders from the start. But even so it's a small group of stakeholders who are consulted, in order to get the document published sooner."

Will the PAS emulate PAS 56 and lay the foundations of a full standard? Adamson says there has always been an assumption within government and at least part of the crisis management committee that a full standard was a possibility in the longer term. "At the outset, the group has decided they very much want to move to a full British standard - but that does depend on the feedback they get back about the PAS," he says. "That's why they've included so many stakeholders in the process."

Cockram isn't yet convinced that a crisis management standard is close on the horizon. "I think that the discussion has still got quite a

long way to go to reach British Standard and subsequently ISO level," he says. "There is also a danger that you take a subject best left in a general terminology and you try to fit it into quite a tight-fitting cloak that is a British standard. It may be that crisis management doesn't fit into that, and only by consulting around the PAS will people see whether it should be taken forward, or if it's best left as a PAS and best practice guidance."

Peter Power is more overtly optimistic. He says there are many examples of organisations that have handled a crisis very badly, and so many examples where an organisation's excellent crisis management has been seen to have enhanced its reputation and commercial prospects in the longer term, such as Nokia's actions in the wake of the Phillips Albuquerque fire in 2000, that no-one should now be in any doubt as to the importance of crisis management: "I'm thrilled this is taking place, and I really hope people get something from it." He is sure that when the PAS does see the light of day it will have been worth waiting for.

