

When the lights are off, the bathrooms are really, really dark.

No Power, No Phone, No Service

JAMES COLLINS

RECENTLY I ATTENDED A DISASTER planning conference sponsored by our state's regulator (Motto: "Slowing business since 1889"). Several entities, including credit unions, regulators, and subject experts, gave presentations ranging from bird flu to hurricanes. The event was so full of good ideas I barely had enough time to wander over to another conference's free food table and swipe breakfast.

Many of the thoughts presented were painfully obvious, but some, especially the following, caught me by surprise:

► **"No. 1, power; No. 2, phone."** Not only is it the chant of MIT's football team but also the two areas that will have problems during almost any disaster. Whether the problem is wind, water, or a member being quite literal with the "drive-through" window, losing either of these can result in long periods of disruption for members.

Also, power or phone problems may make your alarm system as useless as a screen door on a submarine. The resulting safety issue (you can summon the police only by waving a box of doughnuts outside) is problematic. It may be prudent to limit transactions to the drive-through until all is well.

► **"Layers."** Nope, this isn't the recommendation for what my 17-year-old daughter should wear to her next date. It's where you need to have backup plans with multiple redundancies built in.

For example, one

panelist recalled how he thought his credit union was well-protected with a backup generator, only to find it under several feet of water during Hurricane Katrina. Another person lamented how she had to rely on text messages to communicate between branches after the phones died. However, the credit union lacked any 16-year-olds who knew how to type faster than two words per minute.

► **"Payroll."** Let's face it: The line for overly stressful, unpaid positions is a bit short. If your credit union can't promise to pay employees reliably during a calamity, don't be surprised to see them take off for parts elsewhere, leaving you in the dust. Make sure your payroll firm can provide relief through an "emergency" payroll or some other method.

► **"Test."** This wasn't actually a note I wrote, it was the key word in approximately 112 comments. Apparently, the lack of adequate testing was more prolific than a rabbit on Viagra. One credit union routine-

ly backed up its system but never tested it until it was too late. Sometimes, even thorough testing may be inadequate.

We, for example, did a full mock-up of a disaster, even securing alternate hardware. After hours of toil, we restored the entire system and could access it. Well, not exactly. One of us had access. Because we didn't understand how the system handled licensing, we were limited to one person at a time.

Whether the calamity is a Category 5 hurricane, a magnitude 8 earthquake, or Britney Spears' third marriage, being able to adapt is key.

This was brought home during a particularly poignant remark by one panelist, who said, "When the lights are off, the bathrooms are really, really dark."

While the statement may seem silly (after all, only regulators work in the dark), it brought home a point: The most obvious problem is often the easiest to overlook. Planning for a

disaster is difficult because the exact nature, severity, and time is unknown.

However, that's only an excuse. There's no pardon for ignoring events that ultimately can ruin an organization.

The formula for surviving is simple: Think, plan, test, and when done, repeat.

And, oh yeah, remember to put a flashlight in the bathroom. ☺

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