

COVID-19: Pandemic Planning Phases – Where are we and we are we going?

One question I hear from clients every day is “where are we in this pandemic and where are we going?” It is an important question and one that deserves a careful and thoughtful answer. The goal of this article is examine and understand this pandemic through a new and expanded lens of a protracted and sustained incident.

Background

As planners we are all very familiar with the classic four phases of Business Continuity Planning:

1. Plan
2. Detect
3. Respond
4. Recover

And in the world of pandemic planning there are five phases:

- Phase 1: Investigation Interval
- Phase 2: Recognition Interval
- Phase 3: Initiation Interval
- Phase 4: Acceleration Interval
- Phase 5: Deceleration Interval

Although these are helpful from the perspective of the planning effort, it doesn't help a crisis management team organize their work or manage the incident. From our many years of pandemic planning and in assisting companies around the world from the early moments of the coronavirus outbreak, we have developed a new approach that we are calling the *Seven Phases of the COVID-19 Pandemic*.

COVID-19: Seven Phases of the Pandemic

1. **Planning** – Prepare plans and prepare in advance of the pandemic.
2. **Awareness** – Awareness of the threat and assessment our level of preparedness.
3. **Activation/Response** – The threat grows, and we activate our plans and teams.
4. **Re-evaluation (strategic/tactical)** – A deeper and continuous *reassessment*: “what are your *top mission critical functions* that must ***absolutely continue?***” This could *dramatically* change over time.
5. **Cocoon (tactical) / Re-entry planning (strategic/tactical)** – Preservation of the critical functions (by the tactical team) and simultaneously thinking about re-entry/recovery (strategic team).
6. **Re-entry / Recovery** – We dig ourselves out of our cocoon and re-emerge with plans in place on how we will start up and move forward with an eye on a second wave.
7. **Reinvent** – Once we start up, it is likely that we will emerge from this experience changed. What will we do differently, what will we keep the same? We have a unique opportunity to *reinvent* ourselves, in ways we might have thought too radical before.

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Phase One: Planning

Phase One involves the planning that we normally do to prepare for our known risks and threats. We start by conducting a hazard risk assessment and then develop plans, training and exercises to prepare the organization and the responding teams. This would include crisis management, business continuity, crisis communications, technology recovery and pandemic plans. In our current COVID-19 pandemic, all of this *should* be completed by December 31, 2019.

Phase Two: Awareness

In Phase two, we become aware of a threat and begin to conduct an assessment regarding our level of preparedness. For some organizations with a presence in China, this happened early on – by mid-January. For others, it was much later on, even as late as early March. Once organizations became aware, there was a scramble to see what was in place to respond and what was missing. In some cases, companies bounced back to phase one to develop the plans that they discovered were missing.

Phase Three: Activation/Response

As the threat grows, we decide at some predefined trigger that it is time to activate our plans and teams. For some of our clients that was mid-January, for most it was mid-February and for still some it was early March. It seemed to depend on how they viewed the threat. There were some who keep saying the mantra, “it is no different than the flu.” There were others who viewed the disease as a real and credible threat and acted early and boldly. Those companies were more solid in their responses as the disease begin to grab a foothold in the United States and by the time it began to escalate, they were in a regular cadence with their tactical crisis management team, 24-hour operational periods and daily briefings to executives.

Phase Four: Re-evaluation (*strategic/tactical*)

Most companies are now in phase four – re-evaluation. Yes, in any crisis or plan activation we continually re-evaluate – that is true, but this is different. What we are seeing is a deeper and continuous reassessment of what is truly essential. Why is the COVID-19 pandemic so different? There are three reasons:

1. Nature of the threat – a disease is a much different type of crisis. It is invisible, we don't know if we have it in our company or not. We don't know if we or our family are infected. This is tremendous anxiety and concern because the stakes are high as we don't know where our enemy is located.
2. Scope – it is global. Not every country or region is in the same exact place all at once but we will all go through a similar experience, depending on our country's initial response.
3. Duration – a pandemic has the potential to last anywhere from 12 – 18 months. This is not a consistent activation with the likelihood of three waves each lasting three – four months. There is nothing to compare it with in our risk profiles.

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Because of those three major differences, we have to keep asking ourselves over and over again – what is mission critical? It is a deeper and continuous *reassessment* than you would ever do in any other type of crisis. At some point the question might be “what are the *top critical or essential functions* that must ***absolutely continue?***” This is *dramatically* different than a “usual” activation and it could *dramatically* change over time. I am seeing that already in my clients. For example, there might have been a list 100 critical functions they historically had thought were critical to keep the business running and now, in some cases, that list has been cut in half.

Phase Five: Cocoon (*tactical*) / **Re-entry planning** (*strategic/tactical*)

In Phase Five we have two very distinct and different activities – both critical to the preservation of the organization. The first is cocooning. At this stage we have pared down the critical functions to the barest of minimum and our goal is to keep the business alive. So, like a caterpillar spins itself a silky cocoon or molts into a shiny chrysalis, we are cocooning to preserve the business. This is done by the tactical crisis management team and the business units.

Simultaneously it is critical to begin thinking about re-entry and recovery. This is both at the tactical and strategic level of the organization. First on the tactical side of re-,entry, we need to think about how we will “unfold the organization” from the neat cocoon we have placed it in. We can’t open it all at once, otherwise the disease is likely to spread. We must develop a systematic way of restarting the organization, also understanding that we will likely have to fold it back up in two or possibly three subsequent waves.

There is also strategic re-entry issues that executives will be discussing, if they haven’t already. Are there business activities that the company will stop doing, ones that will be added, companies that might be bought or sold or transactions that will start or be stopped? There are many issues that executives will be discussing to determine how the organization moves forward once we emerge.

Phase Six: Re-entry/Recovery

Phase six is about what happens once we dig ourselves out of our cocoon and re-emerge anew in the world with the plans we developed in phase five under our arm. We are unfolding our plans and at the same time paying close attention to what is happening around us in our communities and regions in regard to any COVID-19 spread. There is always a possibility that once activity increases, disease transmission will escalate and physical distancing will need to resume. We must remain on high alert as we start up our organization and keep an eye out for the possibility of a second wave.

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Phase Seven: Reinvent

The last phase is also unique to COVID-19. Once we start up, it is likely that we will emerge from this experience changed. We have lived our lives and conducted our business in ways that we may never before have anticipated. For example, many people working from home. Conducting business by video conference or group chats. The elimination of business travel. We have a unique opportunity to *reinvent* ourselves, in ways we might have thought too radical before. What will we do differently post pandemic and in what areas will we revert back to the way things were done in the days before the pandemic? At this point, all things are possible and many barriers have been removed. We just need to think about what really works.

Going Forward

As we all move forward in this pandemic – physically distanced of course – we have the opportunity to learn, grow and reinvent ourselves and our organizations along the way. The coming weeks and months ahead of us are likely to be challenging both personally and professionally. One of the most important things we can all do is to remember our humanity. To reach out to those in need, to help where we can and to support each other as we move forward together through this difficult time.

Regina Phelps Bio



Regina Phelps is an internationally recognized expert in the field of crisis management, pandemic and continuity planning and exercise design. Since 1982, she has provided consultation and speaking services to clients on five continents. She is founder of Emergency Management & Safety Solutions, a consulting company specializing in crisis management, exercise design and continuity and pandemic planning.

Ms. Phelps is the author of three exercise design books and one crisis management book: *Emergency Management Exercises: Exercise Design, From Response to Recovery, Everything You Need to Know to Create a Great Exercise; Emergency Management Exercises: The Instructor's Guide; Cyber Breach* and *Crisis Management: How to Develop a Powerful Program*. She has also designed college-level courses in exercise design and has written numerous papers and has given hundreds of lectures on the topic. [Find Ms. Phelps's books on Amazon](#)