The threat is legitimate: The world is under a Phase 3 Pandemic Alert. Foremost are the concerted attempts to effect attitudinal changes in senior managers and workers now, rather than delaying until a pandemic event unfolds. Awareness and preparation become the foundation for mitigating the potential effects of pandemic flu. To postpone the revising of policies or waiting to implement critical programs until a pandemic outbreak manifests itself within the population of this or any other country is simply too late. The pre-event stage is the time to devote resources (human and/or monetary) in support of mitigation strategies.

Existing evidence along with expert opinion points to the inevitability of a pandemic flu event. While the exact time of a pandemic outbreak, its geographical spread and length of duration, cannot be predicted with complete confidence, indicators tracked by the public health community give cause for concern. The pre-event stage is, in actuality, the lull before the storm and affords Private Sector leaders and business continuity planners the chance to position their organizations for survival. To do otherwise is a gamble where the wrong bet carries devastating consequences.

Pandemic Flu endangers population to a much greater degree than critical infrastructure. People endure significant risk during pandemic flu. Generally, critical infrastructure escapes largely unscathed until the victim count climbs. The exercise scenario underscored this point by examining the 1918 Pandemic Flu’s impact on both the American economy and society.

The 1918-1919 Pandemic Flu was the last epic pandemic to wreak havoc across the globe. The United States alone suffered more than 675,000 deaths. America’s institutions and infrastructure deteriorated due to fear, incapacitation and grievous loss. Since the population is a “soft target” for mutating viruses, awareness and education become tools to ameliorate anticipated “spikes” in flu cases.
The altering of existing behavioral patterns is inexorably linked to health care and victim management. Despite the ominous presence of danger, behavior modification takes time.

Recommendation: Protecting workers against undue risk, by concentrating on awareness and prevention, helps protect the viability of critical infrastructure. According to participants, employee training must commence in the pre-event stage to later reduce the incidence of needless exposure and infection. Understanding the rationale behind such programs and recognizing the valuable contributions of workers during crises, such as public health emergencies, instills in individuals a sense of relevancy while hopefully improving compliance with mandated practices.

Highly touted automation and advanced information technology (IT) systems can perform functions without human operators for only limited periods. Human interface is required to minimize disruptions through the repair and restoration of vital systems especially when knocked or taken offline. Sustained absentee rates of 40 percent or higher lasting six to eight weeks will undoubtedly undercut the private sector’s ability to deliver services and product lines. Substantive change, eight weeks will undoubtedly undercut the private sector’s viability of critical infrastructure. According to participants, concentrating on awareness and prevention, helps protect the workforce and relocating to other sites. Mass prophylaxis of medications is no substitute for comprehensive business continuity planning. Relying solely on Tamiflu, Relenza or other anti-viral medications is no substitute for comprehensive business continuity planning. The principles of continuity planning still apply regardless of whether the menacing event is pandemic flu or some other scourge. Several recommended business continuity measures advocated by the exercise participants to offset the devastating impact of pandemic influenza included: dispersing the workforce, mandatory social distancing, restructing the workweek and telecommuting.

Recommendation: Companies who adequately support continuity and preparatory plans improve their own likelihood of recovery and survival following catastrophic events. Conversely, those who are least prepared or ill-suited to dedicate the commensurate funding for recovery increase their odds of failure.

Viable business continuity planning is multifaceted. Pandemic flu planning is a component of business continuity planning. Relying solely on Tamiflu, Relenza or other anti-viral medications is no substitute for comprehensive business continuity planning. The principles of continuity planning still apply regardless of whether the menacing event is pandemic flu or some other scourge. Several recommended business continuity measures advocated by the exercise participants to offset the devastating impact of pandemic influenza included: dispersing the workforce, mandatory social distancing, restructing the workweek and telecommuting.

Recommendation: Companies who adequately support continuity and preparatory plans improve their own likelihood of recovery and survival following catastrophic events. Conversely, those who are least prepared or ill-suited to dedicate the commensurate funding for recovery increase their odds of failure.

Telecommuting and working remotely carry inherent technological shortcomings. Computer models depict a 40 percent or more absentee rate among the American workforce for 12 to 18 weeks during a severe pandemic. Migrating to electronic networks and the Internet is a preferred option frequently cited by the business community to reduce exposure risks. Nonessential employees would work from home using a virtual medium to minimize lost productivity.

The specter of catastrophe, pandemic flu included, necessitates increased private sector emphasis on self-sufficiency and self-help. The private sector recognizes the ongoing shift in preparation and response paradigms. The private sector is expected to share the responsibility for disaster preparation, response and recovery.

Recommendation: Companies who fail to plan properly or rely on someone else to secure their safety are inviting calamity. Participants commented on the robust policies and procedures their companies are weighing and, in many cases, enforcing to ensure business continuity proceeds without fatal disruptions. Guaranteeing business survival demands a commitment, changes in organizational culture, and a re-thinking of priorities and programs. An applicable question for the private sector to ponder is, “How long will we be on our own?”

A disparity in size, wealth and influence among companies can expose economic and social divisions during catastrophic events. Businesses are assuming increased responsibilities for protecting themselves. With the government espousing self-help, the disparity of resources and fiscal vitality among private sector companies could threaten fissures in the social fabric. Generally speaking, large companies have the planning expertise and financial wherewithal to take care of their employees. Those lacking the monetary assets or are unable to properly safeguard their workforces could find themselves in precarious situations following serious catastrophes. What happens when government does not deliver the required level of assistance in a timely manner is well documented.

Recommendation: Companies who adequately support continuity and preparatory plans improve their own likelihood of recovery and survival following catastrophic events. Conversely, those who are least prepared or ill-suited to dedicate the commensurate funding for recovery increase their odds of failure.
Under this arrangement, workers who also care for dependent parents or school-age children could balance job and family obligations while a health emergency persists. Academic institutions espouse a similar approach in lieu of traditional classes to reduce human-to-human transmissions of deadly viruses.

Are existing communication/IT systems robust enough to absorb a sudden surge in demand stemming from telecommuters and students who switch to online classes during school closures? Of equal concern is the additional burden placed on the Internet and networks by large numbers of casual and recreational users with “found” time on their hands. The issue of managing abnormal demand over an extended period of time presents the IT industry with a dilemma. With the proliferation of computing, communication and wireless devices, how do you suddenly curtail the consumer’s voracious appetite for services to minimize competition with business and academia during an emergency?

Recommendation: Leverage time during the pre-event period to test telecommuting and worker dispersal plans against the surge capacity of existing communication/IT systems. Run exercises to uncover shortfalls and vulnerabilities and assemble an action plan to correct discovered deficiencies. Stress hardware and network systems by simulating hypothetical operational conditions to the fullest extent possible. Do dry runs where nonessential employees work from home periodically. Adverse weather events are excellent test beds. Do not assume Internet connectivity is available in every home or that network firewalls will permit unencumbered access from outside locations. Most importantly, increase bandwidth capacity now when the assets and personnel are available. Like so many other preparatory activities, the surveying and “hardening” of IT networks requires an unwavering commitment from the company’s top leadership.

Employees must understand the personal obligations they have toward their employer, co-workers, community and family.

Several companies have already launched broad pandemic flu prevention programs. Business continuity strategies, however, will have little consequence if not fully embraced by the workforce. Instilling trust in the minds of workers and their families is crucial for successful plan execution. Employees must exhibit confidence in a company’s ability to protect them and their families. To gain worker acceptance and compliance, they must first comprehend the threat and how they can personally contribute to its mitigation. Workers will typically endorse mitigation measures, such as personal hygiene, social distancing and cough etiquette, if they feel safe on the job and believe competent leaders are in charge.

Recommendation: Few plans are effective without an accompanying education and training strategy. Instructional methodology and curriculum delivery will vary among private sector organizations; however, education is the cornerstone for eliciting desired behavioral changes whether adherence to strict personal hygiene or preventing “presenteeism,” i.e., employees reporting to work when sick. The ultimate goal is to institute effective and lasting changes across the organization.

**Education is a prerequisite for understanding the immediacy and nature of the pandemic flu threat.**

A good internal communications plan will help prepare workers psychologically for a pandemic event. The goal is to acknowledge the dangers of an impending pandemic flu outbreak and solicit support for effective mitigation strategies. Each person plays an important part in preparing for a pandemic by taking training seriously and having an individual and family emergency plan. Crisis communications must also consider the diversity of customs and languages found across the American workforce.

Recommendation: Substantive discussion among an eclectic group of exercise participants underscored the enormous value derived from educating civic leaders, workers, customers, regulators and the public during the pre-event stage. A unified approach to public-private pandemic flu communications should start early enough to cultivate trust in both public and private sector initiatives. If successful, expect gradual rather than immediate changes in the audiences targeted. Results do not occur overnight. It takes time to alter and shape foundational, ingrained behaviors.

**Consider the implications of collective bargaining agreements during pandemic flu planning.**

Outbreaks of pandemic flu over broad geographical areas may necessitate the dispersal of workers, changes to traditional workday hours or even the location where work is performed. Concern was also expressed about potential shortages of essential workers at all levels due to absenteeism, illness and death. Presently, managers can fill union-dedicated jobs during crises or strikes but union workers cannot move up to managerial positions under similar circumstances. Thus, with the prospects of a decimated or depleted workforce, the private sector may have to evaluate special accommodations, such as cross-training. For the regulated industries that comprise a large segment of the nation’s critical infrastructure, government may have to grant special exemptions and/or waivers.

Recommendation: The enormity of the pandemic flu problem warrants union engagement and input. Dialogue about the looming threat and need for pragmatic measures calls for unity not enmity. Differences, real and perceived, must be set aside for the welfare of the organization. Union involvement in pandemic flu planning processes and mitigation strategy development is a way to garner cooperation. Again, contingency plans will only work if the people at whom the measures are directed understand the prevailing threat and comprehend the
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Closing Remarks: Michael O. Brown
Former Under Secretary of U.S. Department of Homeland Security
rationale behind organizational planning protocols. Viable pandemic flu preparation demands unanimity and unity of effort. While granting authority to local municipalities, home rule can also slow momentum toward uniform statewide policies and programs with subsequent repercussions for the private sector.

New Jersey’s home rule form of government delegates autonomy to and limits state interference in the affairs of the Garden State’s 566 municipalities. While strengthening the power of local officials, Home Rule can also detract from overall policy development and enforcement. There is a need for statewide, standardized credentials. Credentialing permits essential personnel to traverse the state’s roadways despite travel bans imposed under declared emergencies.

Recommendation: The private sector wants unanswered questions surrounding conflicting regulations resolved well in advance of an event. The core issue is the willingness of governmental entities at all levels to set disagreements aside, and settle conflicts and disputes over authority and jurisdiction for the greater good of all.

Summary of Exercise Findings:

- The threat is legitimate: the world is under a Phase 3 Pandemic Alert.
- Pandemic Flu endangers the population to a much greater degree than critical infrastructure.
- Triggers for action vary between the public and private sectors, often significantly.
- Shifting emergency management paradigms place increased emphasis on self-sufficiency.
- A disparity in size, wealth and influence among companies can expose economic and social divisions during catastrophic events.
- Viable business continuity planning is multifaceted.
- Telecommuting and working remotely carry inherent technological shortcomings.
- Employees must understand the personal obligations they have toward their employer, co-workers, community and family.
- Education is a prerequisite for understanding the immediacy and nature of the pandemic flu threat.
- Consider the implications of collective bargaining agreements during pandemic flu planning.
- While granting authority to local municipalities, home rule can also slow momentum toward uniform statewide policies and programs with subsequent repercussions for the private sector.
- The Canadian SARS experience portends a disproportionate risk for health care workers during a pandemic flu outbreak.
- Attempt to define the “new normal” in a post-pandemic world.

The Canadian SARS experience portends a disproportionate risk for health care workers during a Pandemic Flu outbreak. Computer models project a persistent workplace absentee rate of 40 percent or higher during a severe pandemic flu outbreak. During the SARS outbreak in Canada, health care providers, even with personal protective equipment (PPE), experienced infection and mortality rates above the norm. Exposing health care workers to a greater probability of risk could degrade the delivery and quality of medical services. Should the state’s health care system undergo extreme stress during a pandemic due to shortages of supplies and staff, then the repercussions will surely ripple outward to other sectors. Eventually over time, the drive for self-preservation among health care workers may supplant any personal sense of service before self.

Recommendation: Properly orchestrated protocols should promote confidence and trust in emergency medical plans and processes. Provide health care workers with the proper training and exercising on precautions and safeguards, including personal protective measures. Everyone involved must know the planning scheme, as well as the risks. In addition, being candid and forthright promotes understanding and acceptance for how the organization will respond in a crisis. Waiting until the proverbial staff hits the fan before bringing the workforce up to speed on new practices is too late.

Sharing plans to dispel myths and misconceptions allows employees, not just those in health care, to deal with complex issues rationally. Compartmentalizing information yields the opposite result. Use recurring drills and exercises to reinforce key processes. Another aspect is information sharing. Communicate pandemic flu plans externally with other agencies to strengthen partnerships and expand network affiliations. Getting through a crisis on the scale of the 1918 Spanish Flu will entail close cooperation with governmental agencies and other private sector entities.

Attempt to define the “new normal” in a post-pandemic world. Catastrophic events leave behind a legacy of loss and suffering in their wake. Past pandemics, specifically the 1918 Spanish Flu, demonstrated an ability to disrupt the underpinnings of society: government, economy, family, and community institutions, social order and services. The toll exacted is not only physical but also psychological, often lasting for generations. Experts believe future pandemics will carry similar repercussions but to what degree remains an unknown.

Recommendation: Business continuity planning does not cease during Response. Rather, it is part of a continuous process and should encompass a range of hazards and threats. Preparing for pandemic flu is, in actuality, a sub-set of business continuity planning. Apocalyptic events are change agents in their own right. Thus, envisioning and defining what will constitute the “new normal” in a post-pandemic period is an onerous but imperative task. Regardless of how dire the predictions, there are a number of things continuity planners can do to improve their organization’s posture. The first is to manage change.

A desire to re-capture the familiarities and routines of living is an expression of human nature. Yet, returning to the status quo following a tumultuous trauma is highly improbable. Regardless of how hard one tries to resist, change is a life rhythm and a natural consequence of tragedy.

Successful organizations rely on adaptability and resiliency to ward off failure especially when our world turns upside down. Try to visualize what the post-pandemic flu environment will look like in order to undertake new operations or restore old ones. Strive to recognize the new and emerging realities in the post-pandemic period and align your organization accordingly.

William Lowe is program director of the New Jersey Business Force, which creates public/private partnerships to fill state and regional homeland security gaps that neither government nor business can fill alone.