

# Exploring the peaks and valleys of Business Continuity Management

You'd think that with the right intentions and a careful, attentive execution, your business continuity plan would be a success, wouldn't you? Unfortunately, that isn't always the case. Many times the smartest professionals prepare what seems to be a perfect approach for their program, but for unforeseen reasons the outcome is, well... less than ideal. What went wrong?

As every business continuity professional knows, there are two types of implementations: those that meet expectations and those that fall short. Both scenarios have lessons to teach us, so let's deconstruct four areas to see what peaks and valleys may be experienced in their implementation:

- Developing your program
- Gaining executive involvement
- Driving maturity models
- Applying methodology

## Developing your program

When it's time to start developing a business continuity program for an organization, many people make the mistake of focusing on their plans as the end result. However, starting with the plan may not be the best idea. Experience shows that it's better to take the time to fully understand the corporate culture, and then apply that understanding to the program. So, what is corporate culture? It's a term used to describe the psychology, collective beliefs, attitudes, values and processes that give your organization its personality.

Some organizations are conservative, others are edgy; some are regulated and others are not; some are tied to tradition while others may be more innovative. Some organizations are focused on the bottom line while others are driven by brand recognition and growth. Some may be a little bit of all of the above.

The point is, each company is unique and that uniqueness is what we call corporate culture. That culture will drive how you position and build your business continuity program. In order to put a solid BC toolbox together you need to really understand what is important to your company, culture-wise, and then map your program to the company.

The first thing you might be encouraged to do is select a tool for the accumulation of plans and business impact data. In reality, the most successful implementations leave the decision of if and when to use a tool for planning until much later in the overall program development.



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As an example, since communication is key to incident response, one of the first business continuity tools you may need could be one for emergency notification. Knowing how your company typically communicates at every level will inform your choice for the right notification system for the organization. Think first about the people, then about the plan.

**The right approach** means designing the program to suit the culture, taking small steps, enjoying incremental successes and introducing tools sparingly until you fully understand the organization and its culture.

**The less successful approach** is to force strict adherence to methodology and structure. If you try to design everything at once, and forget to identify and share the small successes, your program may start off on the wrong foot. The same can be said if you choose your tools, then force the program to match those tools.

## Gaining executive involvement

Executive involvement, or engagement, means that one or more executives act as a champion for your program and can articulate the importance of having a program in place. Executives should understand how resilience within the organization is a strategic business component and one that can give the organization a competitive advantage. More often than not, executives care about far more strategic initiatives than tactical, day-to-day issues. They are more focused on things such as continued growth in revenues and profitability, increasing shareholder values, protecting brands, and similar topics.

How you communicate with executives can lead to a better understanding of the importance of the business continuity initiative and their role in the process and execution. Learning to communicate with executives means switching from using BC terminology to using the language that works best with that audience. As a BC professional, you regularly use terms and acronyms, like risk assessments, BIA, resilience, RPO, etc. However, these terms may not mean much in the executive suite. To really gain mindset and participation from the C-suite, you must frame issues in a way that touches on their key initiatives. Remember that the people at the top are almost always focused on keeping the company healthy and viable with a strong brand and trustworthy reputation. If you keep returning to those points you are likely to get and keep their attention.

In order to engage the interest of your executive, it's important you talk about your program within the context of a bigger picture, keeping the value of your program aligned to the strategic initiatives of the executive.

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**The right approach** means you really know your company and understand the key business areas that draw your executive's focus and drive the business itself. Start by reading your company's annual report, paying particular attention to key initiatives. Use these as guidelines to intersect your BC initiatives. Be flexible in your approach and show the value of your program through stories and examples.

**The less successful approach** is trying to force higher-ups to use the language and understand the methodology of the BC/DR world. If you get too deep into the details, using jargon or acronyms, or try to show value by producing lots of cumbersome plans, you are likely to lose your audience quickly.

## Driving maturity models

Putting a program in place means keeping that program viable and growing, constantly adjusting to changes in the organization. You can look for measurements of the health and wellness of your program by measuring it against external metrics such as standards, maturity models and other defined best practices. However, remember that this won't always correlate to improvements that drive a return on the investment of those advancements.

Culture determines the degree of maturity required for your program and not all areas of your organization will need to approach the same level of maturity. A good way to measure maturity is to measure your program against an established and recognized business continuity standard. There are lots of great ones out there, and choosing one to align with will certainly bring your program to a high level. You can use your chosen standard in the early stages as a guideline or a way to start the conversation. Remind those in charge that if your business doesn't align to a standard today, sooner or later a company you do business with is likely to require that of your organization. Don't try and reinvent the wheel but instead use accepted practices to drive to maturity, keeping in mind what is reasonable and appropriate for your company. Not all areas need to measure 100 percent against a standard unless there is a true business justification for achieving conformance in total to a given standard.

**The right approach** means finding the balance of maturity that works for your company or organization, using an existing maturity model or standards coupled with best practices as guides. Understanding where return and investment converge and taking the steps in the right direction, slowly but surely, will net you a workable plan.

**The less successful approach** is when you try to move everything at once, aiming for 100 percent achievement to conformance in an inflexible way and not clearly articulating the value of your approach.

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## Applying methodology

Methodology offers a great resource to guide us through the program implementation and ongoing management, but in most organizations it becomes a rigid guideline that often does not match the culture of the company. When you force compliance in rigid ways to methodology, you risk diminishing the enthusiasm and support of executives and those in business areas involved in the program.

Your ultimate goal is to make sure that you've designed a program that builds a construct for creative problem solving at time of crisis. A paper plan is great, but when the heat is on, people are more likely to rely on their internal resources (based on your plan, of course) to guide and direct. What you ultimately want to do is provide people with an educated and disciplined way to respond to a crisis.

**The right approach** means acknowledging the culture and realizing that all businesses don't need the same structure; it's more important to fulfill the business need. Cover the essentials and base your content on criticality and complexity. Use standards as a guideline where it makes sense.

**The less successful approach** is when you try to go straight to certification or when you work in a silo, isolating your program. Even worse is when you approach the development of plans and conducting of exercises as an excuse to look busy. Trying to develop an overly detailed, one-size-fits-all plan or allowing the tools to drive your plan is a recipe for failure.

## Summary:

### You'll sink into valleys if you:

- Fail to articulate the value of your approach
- Ignore the culture of the organization in your initiatives
- Reside in isolation within your company
- Act too aggressively without buy-in across the organization
- Move too slowly with initiatives

### You'll climb to the peaks when you:

- Include a risk assessment of the initiative
- Educate and foster awareness of what you do
- Demonstrate ownership and accountability rather than just a plan
- Align your program to corporate culture rather than to a project
- Communicate during steady states as well as crises
- Speak to your audience in their language, understanding their goals and objectives

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## Don't be afraid to make mistakes

Use this information to help you take the initiative, to try some things and see if they work for your company. Don't be afraid to make mistakes. In the words of John Poindexter:

*You accept failure as a possible outcome of some of the experiments.  
If you don't get failures, you're not pushing hard enough on the objectives.*

Pay careful attention to your corporate culture and market your program within the interest of the organization. Understand why people do what they do, and what ultimately drives your business. Remember, the highest peak for a business continuity professional is to stand at the top and see the big picture.

This paper was written in collaboration between Ann Pickren of OnSolve® and Michele Guido of Southern Company.

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## About OnSolve:

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