

REVIEW BY JOHN ADAMS OF

SITTING IN THE HOT SEAT: LEADERS AND TEAMS FOR CRITICAL INCIDENT MANAGEMENT

BY RHONA FLIN

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I prepared myself to review this book by watching the video of *Die Hard 2* - in which the hero, Bruce Willis, successfully manages a critical incident at Washington's Dulles Airport. The plot, in which the villains were holding the airport to ransom in order to win the release of a captured drugs baron, contained all the features, listed by Flin of a true hot-seat job:

- Ill-defined goals and ill-structured tasks
- Uncertainty, ambiguity and missing data
- Shifting and competing goals
- Dynamic and continually changing conditions
- Action feedback loops (real time reactions to changed conditions)
- Time stress
- High stakes
- Multiple players (team factors)
- Organisational goals and norms
- Experienced decision makers.

And Willis displays all the "right stuff", elaborated by Flin, required of the ideal occupant of the hot seat. He is a "naturalistic" decision maker. His "intuition" enables him to make sense of the ill-defined, ill-structured ambiguous problem with which he is confronted. He copes well with stress and high stakes. He is decisive. He is experienced - I'm told he did rather well in *Die Hard 1* - and above all he is a maverick who refuses to be bound by rules and bureaucrats when they are standing in the path of what needs to be done.

Flin quotes an experienced, and unhappy, offshore manager who complained in the aftermath of the Piper Alpha disaster, that the Health and Safety Executive are now "looking for the perfect being, somebody like Clark Kent, who will sit in his office chair carrying out mind numbing admin for 364 days of the year with a wry grin on his granite hewn features, only to disappear into the closet on hearing the general alarm and to appear in a trice with flowing cape, a pair of tights complete with modesty knickers over them and a huge OIM [offshore installation manager] emblazoned on the chest. Ready to take on the world. Where they are going to find him, God only knows and when they do I want to be there to read the job description and see the salary grade."

This lament encapsulates, while understating, the dilemma confronting those who seek either to select, or to train people who would make effective occupants of the hot seat. One day per year greatly overstates the frequency with which most enterprises would expect, or tolerate, an incident, of the sort discussed by Flin, whose magnitude or character overwhelms contingency plans for dealing with it.

After every major disaster there is an inquest: Piper Alpha, the fire on the Scandinavian Star, the Bradford football stadium fire, the Heysel and Hillsborough football stadium disasters, the Kings Cross fire, the Clapham Junction Rail Crash, the Kegworth air crash, and United Airlines flight 232 are Flin's best known case studies. Such inquests usually take an interest in how the disaster, once underway, was managed; but their principal purpose is to make recommendations for changes in practice to ensure that such things can never happen again. To the extent that they succeed they extend the period during which the services of superman are not required.

Managers of inherently dangerous activities, such as the generation of electricity by nuclear means, or the transport of people and goods through the channel tunnel strive to convince their neighbours or customers that the risks associated with their activities are negligible. But it is difficult to shield their own workers from their safety propaganda. The combination of the perception of a risk as negligible, and long intervals between serious incidents makes it difficult to sustain the interest of the work force in the fire drills, let alone in procedures for dealing with unlikely disasters. Certainly where I work - in a building made of concrete and steel and glass - our frequent fire drills are gone through in a manner that can best be described as perfunctory. I suspect that in a serious emergency we would behave like headless chickens.

Flin observes that "the 'right stuff' for a single-pilot fighter plane was precisely the 'wrong stuff' when he became the captain of a three-man crew on the flight deck of a commercial aircraft." The Bruce Willis character of the *Die Hard* films would make a mess of the bureaucratic routine of managing an airport, or the boring job of piloting a commercial airliner, but is precisely the sort of courageous, inventive, rule-bending character one that one would like to have around when matters get truly exciting.

The message to be drawn from this book is that we should not seek to make all Clark Kents into supermen, but that we should strive to arrange the means by which specialist emergency services - the fighter pilots - can be got to the problem as quickly as possible.

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