Business Continuity Terminology Update

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Most areas of practice have their own language. In legalese, these are called terms of art. Indeed, *term of art* in law is itself a term of art. In the practice of business continuity, we have many terms of art, and the language is growing with every innovation and each new concept.

The purpose of terms of art is enhanced understanding and productivity through common language. In the operating room, the surgeon says, "Scalpel," as opposed to, "Give me that sharp thingy over there." Words within a particular practice often do not mean the same thing as those same words in common use outside of that practice. "Strike" in baseball is not a command to be aggressive, nor is it a labor union activity or a happy event involving bowling pins. "Firefight" in the military means you're under fire, not in a fire. A "nibble" has no taste at all when it's half a byte. A "disaster" in business continuity is not just any catastrophe. It is an event that compels the movement of function to an alternative location.

Whereas terms of art should reduce confusion, disagreement or uncertainty about their meaning within a practice could actually increase confusion. Declaring a disaster usually means the organization has committed to moving operations. If a senior executive doesn't understand that, he or she might think that disaster declaration merits government aid. Indeed, a disaster in the practice of federal emergency management is a catastrophic regional event, and a major disaster is one for which the president authorizes federal aid. Certainly, this differs radically from the meaning of the word in business continuity parlance. The difference could be especially confusing given the tight relationship between FEMA and business continuity professionals.

Are professionals in one practice or the other using the term incorrectly? Hardly. It's a term of art. Each practice defines the term for its own use. Of course, a practice doesn't define anything. People do, and people disagree, even within a practice. Furthermore, terms mature as practices mature. *Enterprise resilience*, for example, once used principally to describe corporate ability to weather market and economic fluctuations, is now employed to include responsiveness and adaptability to operational conditions. Where common sense dictated that corporate resilience was of paramount importance in the marketplace, it is now equally important internally to protect functionality.

So, following are definitions and explanations that I believe coincide with common sense, if not common usage, within the business continuity practice. These definitions are subject to discussion, since no one person can make the rules in a practice. Usage and agreement form the basis for terms of art. Consider this article a basis for discussion.

The Search for Meaning

First, consider that even the term *business continuity* encounters disagreement as to its meaning within the contingency planning industry. When first introduced and less commonly now, business continuity was a euphemism for disaster recovery, and had no real connection to the business outside of IT. However, for most practitioners, use of the term has matured beyond that. Today, many practitioners use the term to represent what the corporation does to recover

its business processes, distinct from disaster recovery, the latter of which may be used strictly as a label for the process and tools to recover the information infrastructure. Of course, in the aftermath of a disaster, a plan to recover a process outside of IT is still a disaster recovery plan, whatever else you may call it. So, to other practitioners, including this author, the term business continuity encompasses the gamut of mechanisms that maintain continuity in business, including all forms of problem resolution and preventive mechanisms like quality assurance and security. That is how I use the term in this article, although other usage of the term certainly is valid. Again, validity is a matter of usage and common sense.

Let's look at some more terminology from an overview perspective. *Problem* is a term of art. Its meaning differs among disciplines. In business, problems have the capacity to cause discontinuity in business processes, so *problem management* fosters continuity in business. Everything we do in business continuity planning is some subset of problem management. Take incident response, for example. An incident is the beginning of a problem. Something happens, and it's disruptive. In the purest sense of the word, an incident need not be disruptive. "I dropped my pencil," is an incident. However, in business continuity, we think of an incident as an event with potentially serious negative consequences. "The dog ate my homework," is disruptive with potentially serious consequences. Incident response is what we do (or automated systems do) at the outset of a problem to diminish consequences.

Various theories of organizational structure purport that organizations consist of people, what people or systems do (processes), and what they do them with (tools). Similarly, the organization of problem management addresses how people and systems behave, including processes for problem resolution, reporting structures, policy, and resources. A specific vocabulary applies to each of these areas of problem management. What's important is that, at the highest level, we're dealing with people and how they behave in dealing with problems. If, in fact, we were to develop a model for problem resolution, it would describe how people behave in managing problems, and it would need to contain the vocabulary that describes such behavior.*

A Business Continuity Behavior Model

What would such a model look like? A model implies standards. How can there be standards for problem resolution when different people handle problems differently based upon expertise and position in the firm? Also, the specifics of problem resolution differ from problem to problem. Still, all problems fit certain categories according to what it takes to solve them, and we can manage to these categories. Problems are either very disruptive or minimally disruptive. They can be resolved quickly or over long periods of time. They either need major physical resources or very few. In other words, there are little problems and big ones. Some problems start little and get bigger, based on potential or realized impact at any point in time.

Problem size is the foundation of a problem-resolution model. From left to right, an illustration of the model starts on the left with low-impact problems and ends on the right with

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* Over the past few years, a group of my colleagues developed such a model, and I am using that model in this discourse. Other models are possible. This is one we have used successfully to provide enhanced communication and productivity within corporations.

catastrophic problems. There is one thing all the way to the left that precedes the smallest of problems. It's called *continuity best practices*, those practices that minimize the number of problems. Continuity best practices include lessons learned once a problem is solved, so the model could be considered circular, starting and ending with best practices.

From an organizational perspective, day-to-day processes, including help desk and customer support personnel, generally handle a morass of low-impact problems. Occasionally, problems are or become greater than low-impact. At that point, the problem can be declared a *situation*, and problem escalation procedures are in order. (*Situation* is our next term of art, folks.) Situations are problems greater than low impact. The size of a situation is determined by measuring response-time degradation, impact on corporate performance, environment, number of affected customers, impact on schedules, and prospects for hard failure.

A situation needs to be handled by a special team, called a *problem resolution team,* and managed by a *situation manager*. A situation can escalate to crisis proportions when major organizational objectives are subverted. It's a turning point in problem escalation. We're now into crisis management. At the point a problem becomes a crisis, alternative processes become necessary to fulfill major objectives while the problem is being resolved. In this segment of the *business continuity behavior model*, we identify these actions as *service continuity*. If the alternative processes need to be executed at an alternative location, we call it a disaster. A disaster requires major predetermined resources and a whole new problem resolution team, often called a *recovery command team*.

The composition of a problem resolution team is determined by the nature of the problem. Situation managers come from all levels of management. A severed communications line demands technical expertise on the problem resolution team, whereas product failure demands public relations expertise and the immediate participation of C-level management. Whatever the nature of the problem resolution team, most teams need other teams in crisis mode. A human resources team is an important player both locally and at the corporate level. Similarly, Public Relations is crucial in most crises. An emergency response team often participates in immediate reaction to a crisis. The reporting structure that connects these teams is a matter for another discussion, but is worthy of mention here in that it contributes to business continuity terminology.

Conclusion
A clear understanding of business continuity terminology is important to clear and complete communications both in recovery planning and in problem resolution. An incident can escalate to a situation, then to a crisis. Who handles the problem depends upon the nature of the problem, situation, or crisis. Common language helps all involved to be clear about the status of the problem and accountabilities for its resolution. Agreement about terminology is largely dependent upon an understanding of business continuity behavior.

This article is not the definitive work in business continuity terminology—there is no definitive work. Terms of art evolve based on usage. If you are a business continuity practitioner, you are one of the experts, one of those responsible for the evolution. We need to keep talking.