

Red Cross CIO Offers Lessons Learned Day Before Local Crisis



Steven Cooper, CIO of the American Red Cross (ARC)

"If you want to be where the action is, follow me."

Steven Cooper wasn't kidding when he told a sold-out crowd at PMI North Carolina Chapter's Seventh Annual Event about management in a time of crisis. Mr. Cooper, the first CIO of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS) and current CIO of the American Red Cross, went from preventing terrorist attacks to responding to hurricanes Katrina, Rita and Wilma, all in five years.

"Steven Cooper has a unique vantage point on two of the biggest disasters in U.S. history," said Sidd Chopra, PMP, vice president of communications for the chapter and event master of ceremonies. "He has critical insights on how companies and organizations should react when the unthinkable happens."

The very next day, the area had a disaster of its own in Apex, North Carolina, that made national news. Thousands were forced to flee after a fire broke out at a hazardous materials plant. More than 17,000 residents received evacuation orders to avoid noxious fumes. The Red Cross opened two shelters and welcomed more than 300 overnight guests.

The day before at the chapter event, Mr. Cooper

was joined by the 2005-2006 Toastmasters International President, and two-time world championship of public speaking runner-up, Dr. Dilip Abayasekara, who instructed the attendees on "how to speak so people listen."

"The conference brought in luminaries in project management from the U.S. and Canada to discuss topics like emotional intelligence, leadership, managing international projects, managing expectations, portfolio management and Mr. Cooper's prophetic keynote on crisis management," Mr. Chopra explained.

At DHS, Mr. Cooper was responsible for joining 22 federal agencies with 38,000 IT systems and networks, and 180,000 people into a massive new department. Four years later, he left DHS for the Red Cross to "get some balance back into my life." Then Katrina hit, and then Rita, then Wilma.

Mr. Cooper said that with Katrina, "We had to assist four million people. Within two days, we recognized the scope of the disaster. I recognized that there was no way we were going to be able to handle this ourselves."

He called 27 companies that had equipment or capability that fit what the Red Cross needed, or those where he personally knew the executive.

"It is terribly important in any type of response to have some type of relationship with the people you are going to have to work with," said Mr. Cooper. "I called these executives that I know and said, 'Can you have your best and brightest on a plane to Washington, D.C. tomorrow?'"

Between 75 and 80 people showed up the next day. Every company responded, he said. He asked them to break up into separate teams and put together a project plan.

"Then get back together as an integrated team, vet each others plans, find the dependencies and put together a master plan," he added.

Mr. Cooper told the responders, "The need is now. Within 24 hours, I want all of this done. People were phenomenal. By Sunday people were on planes armed with the plans we were going to execute. Within 10 days, we were operational."

The CIO offered the project managers these lessons learned:

1. When a disaster hits "is not the time to dust off your plan." Drill often and with all the organizations that would be involved.
2. Get to know key people in advance.
3. Know how money will flow. "Preplan some of the funding side on how [you] might do things."
4. Prioritize. "You have to have a process in place" or some kind of portfolio management.

"In the absence of portfolio management, you really aren't able to put the strategic dimension of what you are investing in clearly on the table," he said.

While Mr. Cooper advised the audience not to come to him for career advice, it was clear that he would be the best person to turn to in a crisis.

According to Mr. Chopra, "As project managers, we have all the responsibility for the success or failure of a project. It requires a lot of organization, persuasion and diplomacy skills. Having someone like Steven Cooper advise us was incredibly valuable. The fact that we got expert advice on crisis management the day before our own local disaster was sheer providence."