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10/22/1962: President John F. Kennedy first informs public about the Cuban Missile Crisis.
Photo: AP Images.

Your Office—The Next Cuban Missile Crisis?

by Kathy Graham

“Information does not pass from the tentacle to the top of the organization instantaneously. Facts can be in the system without being available to the head of the organization. Information must be winnowed at every step up the organizational hierarchy...but those who decide which information the boss shall see rarely see their bosses’ problems.”

This statement in *Essence of Decision: Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis* by Graham Allison and Philip Zelikow captures one of the core messages of this book that’s applicable to today’s business executives. This book is also one of the scariest books I’ve ever read as it shares the story of how many times and in how many different ways two superpowers—USSR and the USA—almost blew up the world.

I continually hear stories of how CFOs and CEOs are banned and fined by the SEC and how the senior executives at major financial institutions are in charge of operations where a number of their departments have over a long period of time conducted activities (LIBOR and FX rate rigging, to name two) that were illegal and that cost these institutions and their shareholders, sometimes even taxpayers when it involved bailouts, significant fines and much loss of public trust.

Now some or even many of these top executives may have been aware or directed such flagrant illegalities, but there are numerous stories that I’ve personally heard where these top executives were truly unaware, probably because “information does not pass from the tentacle to the top of the organization instantaneously”... and, in some cases, the information just doesn’t ever get to the top management.

In other cases, I’ve been told that these top executives were given inaccurate information by one department or another. How could these scenarios occur without the executives over these departments being aware of the discrepancies? Do these situations necessarily mean that the executives involved are incompetent? Not always...here’s another example of a similar scenario from this book that illustrates how top management can be caught unaware.

“Why had the Soviets employed extensive security in transporting the missiles from the USSR to Cuba yet, once in the field, there were no security procedures to avoid overhead observation?...The

*units constructing the missiles had no routine for camouflage, having never camouflaged construction activity in the Soviet Union. Moreover, the command had two competing goals: to be ready for action and to conceal its activity. Camouflage would have created extreme discomfort in the tropical heat for people working under the netting or plastic covers. Working only at night, with great stealth, would have slowed the pace of construction and put the work even further behind schedule. **An intelligence agency would likely have made a different choice, but a field organization in the business of deploying missiles could be expected to focus first on completion of preparation for possible combat, particularly when that directive came with a date attached.***

In other words, the operating department had conflicting goals and utilized sane rational decision-making from their viewpoint as to what path they would take to complete which of the two goals they determined was more important. Thank goodness the Soviet missile installation crew made that choice because it was one of the few times that the US saw raw data that alerted them to what the Soviets were up to in Cuba.

From the perspective of the USSR, however, their overall goal was accidentally derailed by one of their own departments. Now, if you're a US proponent, don't feel that the US government acted any more efficiently—the number of errors that US personnel made were equally potentially lethal. For instance, from *Essence of Decision: Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis*, another example:

"A U-2 based in Alaska had been flying an arctic route on a routine mission planned and authorized before the [Cuban missile] crisis to collect atmospheric samples of residue from Soviet nuclear tests. Through no particular fault of his own, the pilot had navigation difficulties that caused him to fly off course into Soviet airspace. Soviet MiG fighters scrambled to intercept the offending aircraft. American fighters in Alaska were then sent aloft to protect the U-2's return. But thanks to the DEFCON 3 alert [issued because of the Cuban missile situation], these American fighters were armed with air-to-air missiles carrying nuclear warheads. Physical control over firing the weapons was entirely in the hands of the individual fighter pilots. Fortunately, the U-2 was able to return to U.S. airspace without a clash.

*At the White House, [President] Kennedy listened painfully as he was briefed on what happened and then, according to the briefer, broke the unbearable tension with an ironic laugh,
"There is always some son-of-a-bitch who doesn't get the word."*

...[and then even though the Secretary of Defense had cancelled all U-2 flights after this first incident] another U-2, following the previously established schedule, had taken off on yet another air-sampling mission from the same Alaskan air base..."

Thankfully, there are many ways today that such mishaps can be avoided in businesses and governments...and these methods will be explored in future blogs on this topic.

In the meantime, if you're a senior executive—thinking about where and how in your organization information is not getting to you or reaching you winnowed of vital facts—reviewing your organization's communication flows to determine how you want to manage such crises before they happen is a good first step. Because if your organization is large, it is complex enough that such Cuban Missile Crisis type of events are highly likely to occur sometime. And, you know, even if your crisis doesn't threaten world peace, it could threaten your peace and career, so please be prepared.