

# How to prepare for a major situation?

Coordination Plans for Soft Targets



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# Clarification of terms for the purposes of this document

**A major situation** is a situation that occurs immediately after a major incident and significantly affects the operation of a soft target. A major situation is a condition that cannot be handled by routine measures. The objective of the soft target in a major situation is to return the organisation back to routine operations as quickly as possible and to prevent further damage. In the context of this document, the phrase is used only in the sense given.

**A major incident** is the designation of an event that by its nature threatens the life, health, property or reputation of the soft target. It cannot be resolved as part of a routine regime and requires a special response. Following an incident, a crisis situation occurs and is dealt with by the Coordination Team.

**Coordination team**<sup>1</sup> is a group of people from a given organization (employees or volunteers) who deal with a major soft target situation according to defined procedures. The coordination team follows a coordination plan and receives relevant

training in the preparation phase.

**The preparation stage** is the period when no incident has occurred, there are no signals indicating that an incident is likely to occur soon, the organisation is operating in a routine manner and has the capacity to prepare for 'worse times'.

<sup>1</sup> More on the Coordination keyword can be found in the [Soft Target Coordination Methodology after a Major Incident](#).



## Introduction

Coordination plans for soft targets are gradually becoming a standard feature of security documentation and an integral part of soft target preparedness. Major incidents that may be faced by a wide variety of organizations, be they schools, universities, train stations, shopping malls, hospitals and others require a different kind of management than routine operations. In particular, the major violent attack by a gunman at the Faculty of Arts at Charles University in December 2023 and the subsequent month-long meeting of the Charles University coordination team demonstrated publicly that soft target coordination following a similar security incident is a challenging discipline worth preparing for.

The methodology focuses on soft targets and therefore its main purpose is to help soft targets prevent or mitigate the consequences of major violent crimes such as terrorism and violent extremism in particular. However, the range of unexpected situations that a soft target may face, where pre-planned coordinated action is beneficial, can be much wider. Therefore, the text of the methodology does not limit itself to these types of situations in the examples of use and instead shows that soft targets can use these procedures more broadly.

- In 2019, the Ministry of the Interior of the Czech Republic issued a methodology (Part 1) Soft Target Coordination after a Major Incident, which defines in particular:
- -What the objectives are and why it is beneficial to have a coordination plan developed for your organisation;

in which situations the coordination plan can be activated;

- when and how to convene the coordination team;
- what composition the team should have;
- what situations the coordination plan addresses;
- what a coordination centre means and how to equip it.

This follow-up methodology, or Part 2, focuses mainly on the preparation and training stage of the soft target. It focuses on the preparation stage rather than what a major situation looks like and what to do in that situation.

Questions like:

- whether it is OK to prepare the plan yourself or whether an external consultant is needed;
- how other safety documentation relates to the coordination plan;
- do we rather need operational cards for individual scenarios or a generic procedure for all situations;
- how to set up a coordination team specifically when we are short-staffed or have no security staff;
- how to conduct drills and exercises and train procedures;
- what is expected of the chair of the coordination team;
- how to communicate in a major situation;

are often repeated in practice. Therefore, the Ministry of the Interior of the Czech Republic has decided to publish this methodology as a clarification to address the topic of crisis preparedness for soft targets.

## Coordination plan: non-binding but useful

Currently, there is no legislative obligation for soft targets to have a coordination plan in place, nor does the law define the form of preparedness for soft targets. In practice, however, we see that even a relatively small investment in preparation, which may not be financially demanding, can help in the event of a major situation.

Soft targets that are legally obliged to prepare a crisis preparedness plan no longer need to create a new plan, but it is advisable that they incorporate the procedures outlined in this methodology and other Mol methodologies into their existing plan. Other soft targets must decide whether or not they wish to adopt their own plan.<sup>2</sup>

## Active involvement of the organisation's management

Unlike other security chapters, the coordination plan and related soft target activities always require an active involvement of the organisation's leadership. In case of setting up a physical security system (cameras, double door systems, etc.), or in case of security plans and setting up incident procedures (how to proceed in case of an incident, which way to run and evacuate, how to secure special events, etc.), it is almost always possible to leave the solution and implementation to security professionals outsourced outside the soft target itself (e.g., a professional security agency).

<sup>2</sup> Ideally, you can consult your completed coordination plan with the emergency services or with representatives of the emergency department/department of the county or municipality. However, please note that they may not always have sufficient time and staff capacity, it depends on the individual agreement and the specific situation.

In case of coordination plans, active involvement of management is required from the very beginning. It is not possible to hire a complete external coordination team to handle a major situation for you. It is not possible to prepare a good coordination plan without your decisions and initiative. The preparedness is based on active cooperation between you and an expert on soft targets. The outcome will depend especially on the level of your involvement and your responsibility for the whole process.

## Stage 0

In recent years, soft targets in the Czech Republic have faced various crisis situations, such as pandemics, armed attacks, floods, fires, and others. In addition, we monitor the impact of the wars in Ukraine and the Middle East. Combined with normal day-to-day problems, there may be situations where a coordination plan needs to be activated.

To better orient ourselves in this diverse range of situations, it is useful to use the term Stage 0.

**Stage 0** is a state where we already know that a crisis situation is likely to occur or have indications that it might occur. An example is a flood, which can be expected in advance based on warnings from the Czech Hydrometeorological Institute. Stage 0 gives us time to prepare if we can correctly assess the signals and activate the coordination team in time.

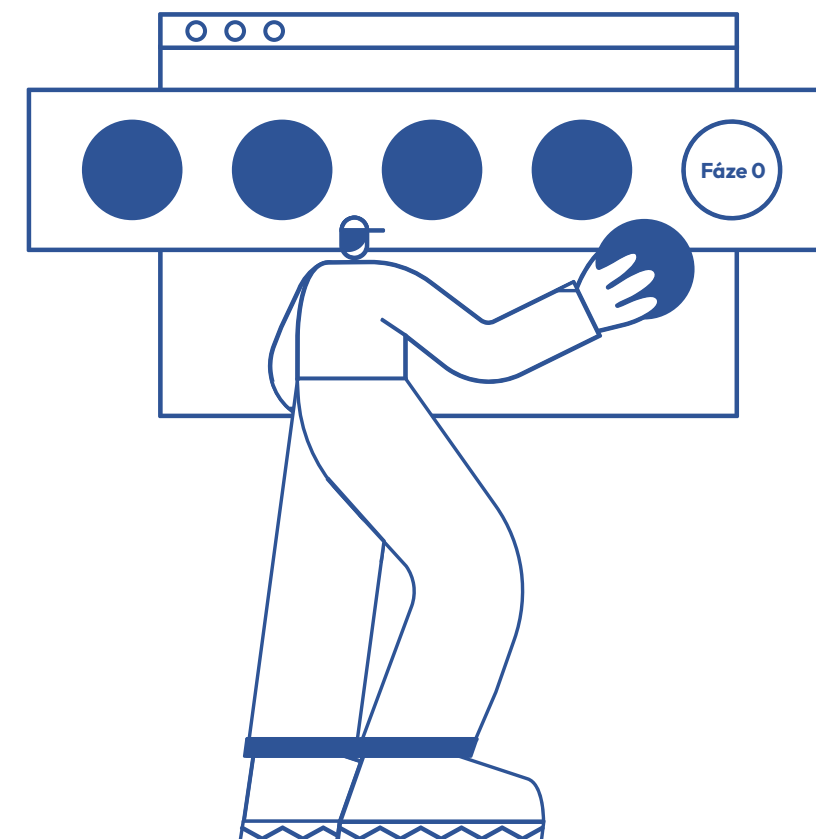
At this stage, the team is not dealing with the aftermath of an incident, but trying to prevent or mitigate an incoming major situation.

The following instruments will help to do this:

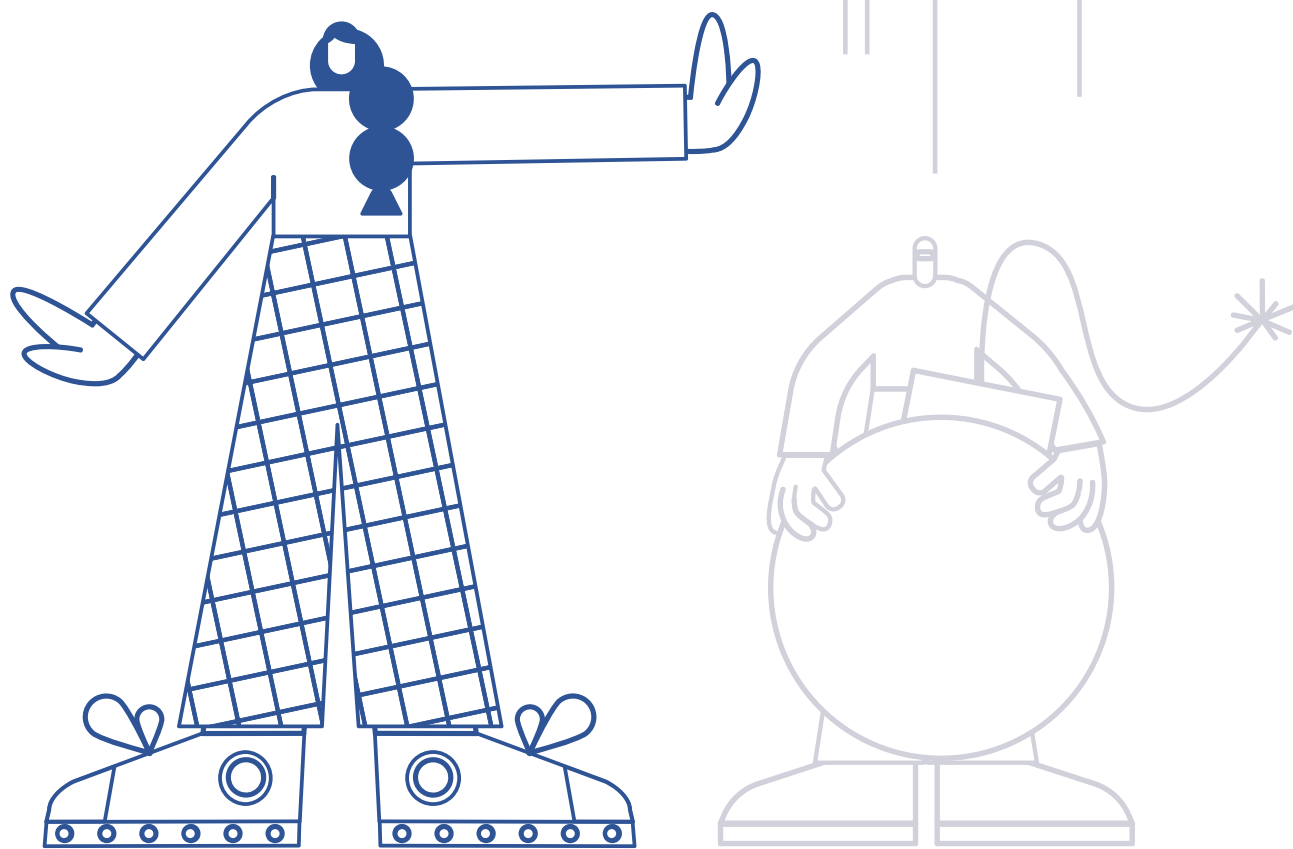
- **A trained team** that can recognize the signs of an impending crisis (e.g., flood warnings or signs of rising tensions within your organization, an announced demonstration near your facilities, etc.).
- **Activation of the coordination team** before a major incident occurs.
- **Decision-making processes** - the team must decide on the way forward, delegate tasks and assess risks.
- **Preventive measures** - prepare scenarios and procedures for different scenarios.
- **Proactive communication** - it is important to communicate openly about the situation, which will set the stage for further action.

From a soft goal coordination perspective, these are different dynamics where a coordination plan can be used.

1. In a major situation following a major incident, where the coordination team is dealing with the aftermath and trying to return to routine operations as soon as possible.
2. In Stage 0 before an incident, when the coordination team is trying to prevent or mitigate the incident in advance. They have time available that can be used effectively. It is therefore not a mistake for the coordination team to convene for a short meeting, discuss the necessary matters and then to disband.



**Phase 0 refers to the period when a crisis is looming, and the coordination team has time to act preventively and mitigate its impact.**



## **A practical example:**

A Berlin primary school in autumn 2020 receives a message from the local town hall that schools have one day to actively prepare for the upcoming term. The measures to be followed by the school are to ensure that pupils and staff are protected from the spread of the COVID19 virus. The headmaster convenes her coordination team with a limited number of relevant

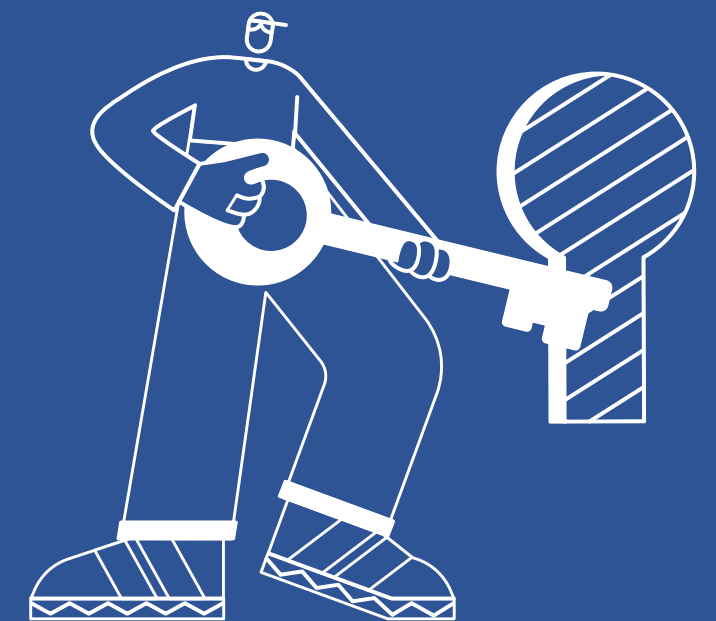
will then be able to function without major interruptions during the pandemic. The strategic decision at the beginning has saved a lot of time and the health of the students.

These and other examples show how effective it is to convene a coordination team and make decisions in Stage 0. Don't be afraid to use the coordination team as soon as you perceive signs that a major situation may be occurring. The coordination plan is not only for an immediate major situation, it is also a prevention tool that helps you respond effectively to situations that may yet develop. Early activation of the plan can significantly reduce damage and facilitate a return to normal operations.

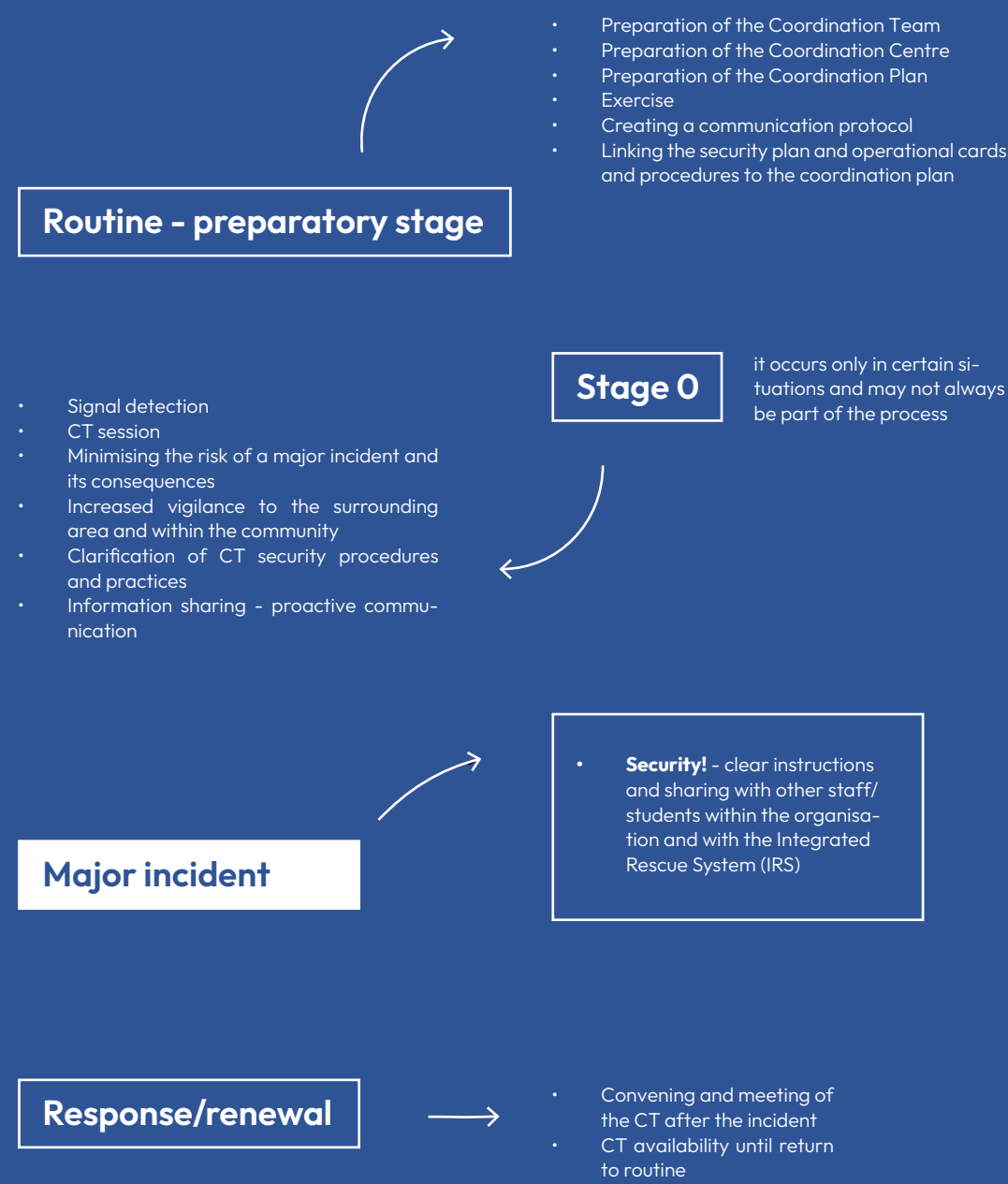
It is essential that the organisation is not afraid to convene the coordination team and use its capabilities.

## **Early use of the coordination team ensured safety and smooth school operations.**

members and follows her own independently developed coordination plan. It addresses the issue of ensuring the safety and health of all pupils in the coming term. After a detailed meeting, she has a plan in hand that clearly sets out the procedures. She distributes the agenda to her team members, changes the study schedule, etc. It is clear that she needs to close the school not for one day but for three days to ensure that she does what the Ministry requires of her and what is necessary to ensure safe operations. She will then be able to run the school much more efficiently. She calls the relevant authorities and informs them of this decision. The school



# The breakdown of stages in a major situation and the main priorities:



## Procedure in the preparation stage

The preparation stage is a period when your organization is operating in routine mode and is not dealing with a major situation. This time is ideal for preparing possible crisis scenarios and responses. We recommend, if it is within your capabilities, to engage a security consultant who has experience with major incidents at soft targets. The consultant will guide you through the process and help you set up coordination plans.

- External consultant: can offer an independent perspective and professional expertise.
- Internal consultant: has a deeper understanding of your organisation and its internal processes.

## Cooperation with rescue and security forces

It is advisable to consult and coordinate your preparedness for a major incident with the relevant emergency and security services, such as the Police of the Czech Republic and the Fire Brigade of the Czech Republic. These agencies can:

- specify your proposed procedures;
- clarify how coordination would take place in the event of a major situation.

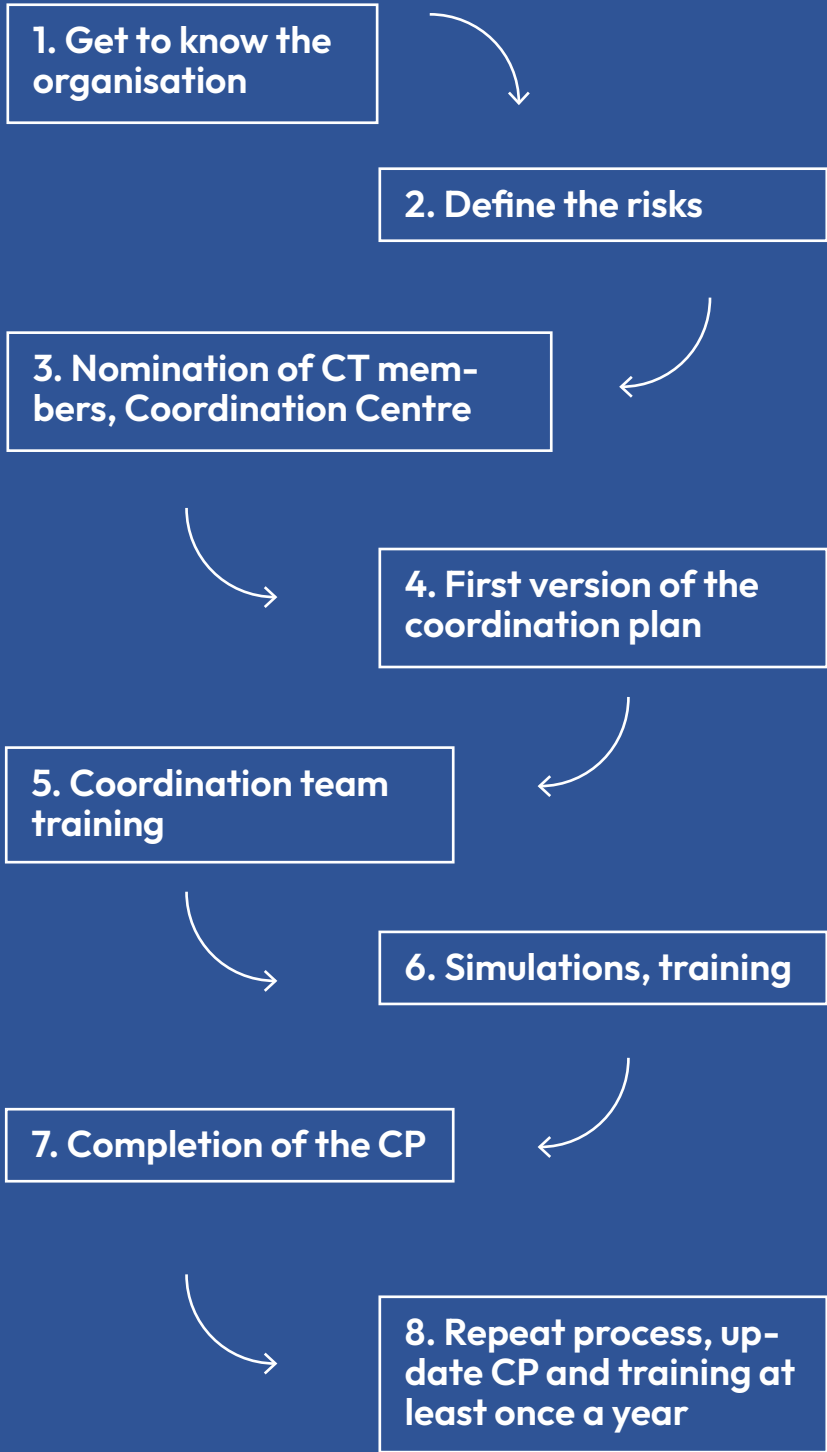
Involving emergency and security forces in the preparation stage helps to build trust and personal relationships, which can be very useful in a major situation.

The following steps will help you prepare your organisation for a major situation in an effective and systematic way.





# Preparing soft targets for major situations



## Point 1-2 Organisational structure and definition of risks:

Your organizational structure and decision-making processes are unique because they are based on the current needs and experiences of your organization. These structures and processes operate in a routine mode, but for major situations they need to be adapted to be effective, functional and acceptable. There is no time for long votes, confirmation of decisions by many parties, lengthy approvals, etc. during the handling of a major situation. At the same time, it is not possible to put all decision-making power in the hands of one person, as he or she may not be reachable in a major situation.

Ideally, a decision-making group of 3 to 5 key people should be formed, depending on the size of the soft target. This group may invite other members on an ad hoc basis as the situation arises. However, this group should be able to react quickly to any unexpected situation and should have clear and simple decision-making processes in place.

In practice, this means that we need to replace the existing decision-making processes with alternative ones that will only be activated in the event of a major situation or Stage 0. These alternative processes and powers should be explicitly defined in the coordination plan. To do this, it is necessary to have a good knowledge of the organisational structure of the soft target and to draw up a diagram of the coordination team on the basis of this knowledge. It is also the reason why generic processes do not work.

The consultant will also help define the risks (major incidents) that your organisation may face. These may include security in-

cidents, natural disasters, traffic accidents (e.g., in case of school trips), cases within the organisation, cyber-attacks, etc.

During the first stage of getting to know your organisation, the consultant should also consider your security awareness, past incidents and possible traumatic events (for example, if you have experienced a major security incident and subsequent crisis in the past, this may significantly affect your attitude and belief in the effectiveness of the proposed solutions, either positively or negatively).

## Point 3 Nomination of members of the coordination team and main methodological principles:

Once you have a first rough idea of the composition of the coordination team, it is a good idea to start by training all or at least some of the members in the methodological principles. The coordination team should know its structure, the roles of each member, be familiar with the principles of activating the coordination team, know the conditions for the appropriate location of the coordination centre and other details that will help in the development of the soft target coordination plan. During the methodological training we recommend to try the first simple exercise. Ideally, you should also have the opportunity to consult your specific case in the course of the seminar and to verify that the composition of your coordination team plus other planned procedures are in line with the methodological principles of emergency preparedness. It may be that during the workshop some decisions may need to be reconsidered (e.g., more or less people are needed for a given position, the location of the coordination centre needs to be changed, operational cards and procedures for specific scenarios

need to be added, etc.). Each soft target is unique, will need to design a slightly different structure for the coordination team, and the composition of the team will also be unique.

#### Point 4-5 First version of the coordination plan and the coordination centre:

Make sure that your coordination plan contains not only operational procedures (ideally in the form of individual cards) for different situations assessed as a risk for your organisation (the list of operational procedures includes e.g. procedures in case of a flood, receipt of a suspicious package, an email threat, an attack in a building, etc.), but also a generic procedure for convening the coordination team and decision-making processes, division of roles, communication protocol, definition of your coordination centre, etc. (see part 1 of the methodology for details). Both of these parts are essential. If you know what to do according to the prepared operational procedure, but you do not have the appropriate managerial apparatus and persons who are willing to help you, you will not know how to communicate and with whom, then you will get through a major situation only in a very lengthy way and with possible losses that may not be necessary.

Also, define your primary and secondary coordination center.

#### Points 6-7: simulation, training and editing of the coordination plan:

There are many ways you can organise simulations and training sessions. Some of the easier ones you can prepare and run yourself or with the help of an external consultant who will tailor the exercise so that you can participate as a team. Large

integrated exercises can be conducted with the presence of and in coordination with the IRS units and other relevant organisations and institutions, such as representatives of the region, the municipality with extended jurisdiction or the municipality. However, this is neither a rule nor a necessity. A basic coordination team exercise is usually not space-intensive, often one or two rooms with audio-visual equipment are sufficient. Unlike exercises such as evacuation or lockdown,<sup>3</sup> you can perform coordination simulations efficiently on a smaller scale. In all cases, the management of the organisation must be informed in advance of the exercise and the participation of those who hold positions in the coordination team must be ensured. In some cases, depending on the type of exercise, it is advisable to inform the IRS units in advance of the date and time of the exercise.

#### Recommendation for coordination team exercise:

- 1. Active participation:** For each coordination team exercise, you will need not only the approval of the leadership, but also the active presence of those members who are part of the coordination team. Count on the fact that someone is always missing, but the main figures of the decision-making team are essential.
- 2. Ensure the safety of the environment:** Before each exercise, check that the environment is safe (e.g., checking rooms, ensuring that the exercise will not be disturbed). Make sure that all participants feel physically and mentally fit to go through the exercise, which

<sup>3</sup> For more information, see the Standardisation of the Security Plan Methodology.

always involves a certain amount of stress. Give those who do not feel up to the simulation the opportunity to leave safely or participate passively. Avoid unannounced departures of participants and ensure that no one outside the exercise enters the simulated situations.

- 3. Prepare the necessary documentation,** coordination plans, check sheets, operational procedures. Check that they are up to date. If you include external partners in the exercise, familiarize them with your documentation, procedures, coordination plan and other relevant information.
- 4. Clear identification of instructors:** Introduce the lead instructor and other members of the instruction team. Participants should clearly know who is leading the exercise. Clearly identify the instructor team and their assistants. If observers are part of the exercise, visibly identify them as well.
- 5. Define the beginning and end of the exercise:** Use explicit signals to start and end the exercise, e.g., START/STOP announcements, whistle sounds or visual cues in the presentation. Set a specific password to interrupt the exercise (e.g., for security reasons).
- 6. Determine the level of simulation:** Decide how realistic you want the simulation to be. For example, how will you simulate phone calls. Especially for the first few exercises, it is sufficient to focus on the content of the message and the ability to formulate it without using technology.
- 7. Clearly mark simulated communication exchanges:** To prevent misunder-

standings, use labels such as “exercise, exercise” before each communication exchange between the coordination team and instructors. This rule helps prevent shock reactions, e.g., when a phone number is misdialled.

## Coordination team exercises should be safe, well-prepared, clearly led, and stress-managed.

- 8. Consider the time and place of exercise:** Organisations that have experienced traumatic events (e.g., attacks) should not be forced to undergo similar exercises too soon after an incident. Remember that improperly conducted exercises can cause trauma. It is important for the security consultant to know your organization (see point 1) and to design exercises that will make your organization more prepared while avoiding the creation of additional stress.

#### Key questions before the exercise:

Anyone preparing a coordination team exercise should ask and answer the following questions:

- What do I want to achieve with this exercise?



- What do I want the participants to learn?
- How specifically will the exercise contribute to our preparedness to deal with a major situation?
- Which aspects will we focus on (e.g., stress reactions, decision-making processes, team convening, internal and external communication, division of roles, teamwork, logistical preparedness)?

These and other questions will help you not only to prepare the exercise, but also to select the appropriate type of simulation and to set expectations. At each stage, it is advisable to complete a different type

of exercise and focus on different aspects.

#### Exercise evaluation:

Once the specific objectives and focus of the exercise are established, determine the method of evaluation:

- How do you tell if the exercise was successful?
- What aspects will you evaluate?
- How many points do you need to meet for the exercise to be considered successful?

Remember that not all coordination teams start at the same level. It's important to determine in advance where the team is and where you want the exercise to take them.

#### Editing the coordination plan based on the exercise

One of the main objectives of the exercise is to verify whether the theoretical procedures set out in the coordination plan correspond to reality and are effective. The

exercise should help to identify:

- The strengths of the coordination team and plans.
- Weaknesses that need to be addressed e.g., gaps in knowledge, equipment or processes.

## Simulations and exercises test procedures, identify gaps, and ensure team readiness for crises.

After each exercise, it is important to go back to your coordination plan and analyse where adjustments need to be made. This process is key to ensuring that your organization is continuously improving and

better prepared for major situations.

#### Cooperation with Consultant:

- The consultant should be actively involved in the exercise and subsequent evaluation.
- The consultant's role is to help you evaluate the results and suggest changes that need to be made to the coordination plan.
- The common goal is to develop a plan that meets the specific needs of your

organization and ensures that the team will be able to respond effectively and on schedule.

The goal of simulations and exercises is not to fail or to be "trapped". They should serve as an opportunity to check whether the defined procedures correspond to reality and how the team is able to apply them. The aim is to identify where knowledge, skills or equipment need to be added and adjust the coordination plan accordingly. Coordination team simulations and exercises are a key tool to ensure your team is prepared to respond effectively, quickly and correctly in major situations. Creating a coordination plan without then testing it in a simulated situation is only half the job done because you have no way to verify that the procedures you set up will work.

#### Exercises, simulations, and other types of training

Since the first meeting with the coordination team, we have been able to practice and prepare mentally for how we would react in a major situation. The stage after a security incident is a period that most people do not think about in routine. At most, in our minds, we end up in the emergency part of the incident. We often don't think about the following stages. That's why it's important to get a proper understanding of these procedures. Exercises are the best tool to do this.

#### 1. Type of exercise relevant to the soft target coordination plan:

##### "Table top" exercise

A basic exercise that does not require much preparation. It is an exercise using e.g., a

power point presentation, where we outline a major incident and subsequent major situation and let the team discuss possible solutions. We direct the questions so that the members of the coordination team are aware of what needs to be focused on in the next stages of preparation.

It can be used at any time, but this exercise is particularly useful:

- At the beginning of the consultation process with the whole team to establish the core areas that need to be addressed.
- For decision makers, top management, directors and leaders, to align strategic thinking and clarify decision-making processes in a crisis situation.

#### 2. Rehearsal/simulation of a crisis situation

A more advanced type of exercise where we simulate a major incident and subsequent major situation using audio-visual materials, prepared emails, phone calls, etc.

The coordination team acts independently and follows the learned principles and procedures described in the coordination plan. It is possible to divide the simulation into a coordination centre and an 'incident site' to make the team aware that the flow of information between the different sites needs to be treated.

- This exercise is the most commonly used, it can be used repeatedly with different scenarios and in different scales of difficulty.
- If you have reached the stage where you know what to do as an organisation and your internal processes are

set up, we recommend inviting representatives from the IRS, county or municipality to these exercises and consulting with them on your procedures. Their insight and recommendations will help you get even closer to reality.

### 3. Integrated/hybrid exercises

Exercises for advanced teams where we combine safety exercises<sup>4</sup> and post-incident coordination team exercises. It is therefore a combination of a simulation of a major situation with an evacuation drill (fire or safety as appropriate) or a lockdown drill or the entire escape procedure Escape! Hide! Fight! You can practice the lockdown or evacuation with everyone in your organization and then continue with just the coordination team as you would in a real situation<sup>5</sup>

In any case, this type of exercise requires careful preparation, including safety precautions. Always report the details of the integrated drill (date, time, location, organisation, panic buttons, public address system, scenario, etc.) to the IRS and the neighbours (there is a difference between a 10-minute lockdown drill of a small kindergarten taking place inside a building where no one can see and, for example, an evacuation drill of a town hall in the city centre). Always consider whether the exercise may cause panic and stress in your neighbourhood and treat such a

thing carefully (e.g., also through informing neighbouring buildings).

### 4. Functional exercises for coordination teams

This is a small exercise focused on a specific functionality in the coordination team. For example, we can test the speed and efficiency of convening a coordination team by practicing convening using a set procedure and tool. We evaluate speed, efficiency and other parameters.

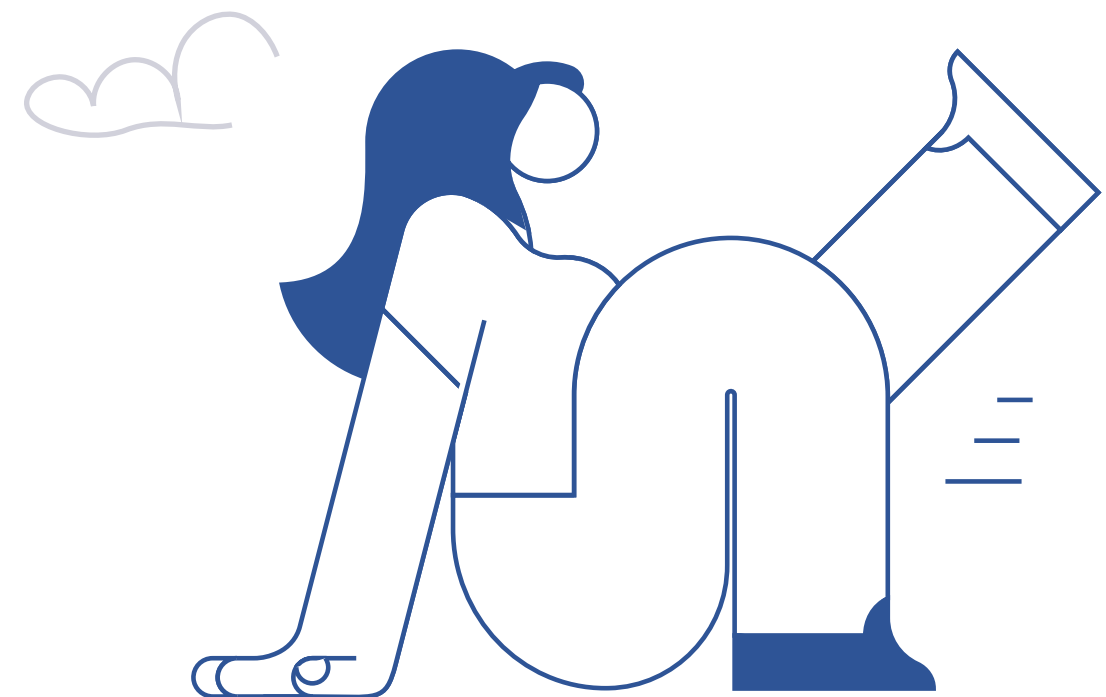
Another option is to verify the functionality of the equipment in the exercise; activate telephones or laptops at non-standard times. It is also useful from time to time to try out communication channels prepared for a major situation, such as apps, websites, social networks, etc. It is not about working with these tools, but about the functionality of the technical and technological equipment itself (see part 1 of the methodology for details).

- This type of exercise is not intended to simulate activity under stress like other exercises, but purely to test the functionality of the procedure in an unexpected situation
- Care must always be taken to properly label all activities as exercise. For example, in the case of a drill session, add “drill, drill!” to the beginning of the message or phone call. and repeat it at the end of the message to avoid confusing the participants.
- This is the only exercise of all the above where there is substantial added value in not announcing it in advance. You can of course announce this exercise in advance and go through it step by step. Likewise, you can try to run this type of exercise at an unexpected

<sup>4</sup> See the Soft Target Security Plan methodology for more details.

<sup>5</sup> In this type of exercise, synergies can be arranged with the IRS; this is a win-win situation where your organization practices the procedure with real partners and the IRS gets the opportunity to practice with a real organization.

**A small functional exercise is used to verify the functionality of procedures, the efficiency of the equipment list, and the effectiveness of the coordination team's call-out process.**



moment. For other types of coordination team exercises, we recommend that you always announce the exercise in advance.

## 5. Communication exercises

In the communication exercises we check the functionality of the communication channels. We can verify both the communication infrastructure according to the communication protocol and try to create the content of the shared information. Of course, these factors can also be practiced in a simulation along with other aspects, however, proper communication during a crisis situation is so important and complex that it deserves separate exercises.

It is recommended to first build the overall coordination system, coordination team, centre and plan at least in basic outline, and then to go deeper into the communication chapter.

Every exercise is composed of the following parts:

1. **Preparation** - selecting the appropriate type of exercise, setting specific objectives for the exercise, preparing logistics, documentation and necessary materials, coordinating with all partners, ensuring safety during the exercise.
2. **Briefing** - always includes a relevant part defining the safety of participants and the level of simulation. The briefing can be done live just before the exercise or in advance, possibly by email or other relevant form of communication. Always ensure that all participants know when the exercise starts and ends, who the instructors are, whether representatives of the

IRS or other organizations and institutions will be present, etc.

3. **The exercise itself** - is clearly defined and completed.
4. **Debriefing (evaluation)** - sharing perceptions and drawing practical conclusions and recommendations. It is ideal to do it immediately after the exercise, when all participants still have the exercise fresh in their minds. It is important that the debriefing is structured and that the impressions experienced do not just become a topic of conversation, but are correctly captured and then translated into effective recommendations. Debriefing is the most important part of the exercise,

## Effective communication can create a sense of trust.

so make sure you set aside enough time for it. Then be sure to reflect the lessons learned in coordination plans and other relevant documents. These practical lessons learned are the most valuable things that can guide you in a real crisis situation that will remain most memorable.

Remember that every exercise will bring a certain amount of frustration, fear, stress and a certain sense of surprise. A properly set up coordination team exercise confronts the team with challenges and dilemmas from which they can draw in real-life situations.

## Communication in coping with a major situation

Communication is one of the main tools of soft target before, during and after a major situation.

In any unexpected situation we find ourselves in an uncomfortable situation, our mind receives and processes information in a different way than in routine. We also experience a weaker version of this state during the exercises themselves. Therefore, it is important to go through them and test our own behaviour. In crisis situations, an overload of negative information is common; our minds can very easily slip into a panic reaction or freeze, misjudging the information. Stress also often prevents us from deeper analysis and we are unable to make quick decisions. Properly managed communication can be a tool to prevent or mitigate these conditions. With the right communication, we can create a sense of trust, resilience and control in those involved, even before an incident occurs.

Don't be afraid to communicate unpleasant news and learn how to convey it properly to those around you. In a major situation, you cannot afford to ignore unpleasant news, pretend it doesn't exist or excuse your reluctance to communicate by saying you might cause panic. Some situations seem less serious and you may feel that you can simply keep unpleasant information from your internal community or the public. Experience shows us that this approach does not work. On the contrary, it backfires by making you untrustworthy to your employees, members, customers, students, or their parents. On the contrary, proactive communication is a very desirable strategy when dealing with a major situation.

Communication of the soft target during such situations does not in any way duplicate the communication of the emergency services or any other relevant entities. Each of these actors plays a different role during the management of a major situation and pursues a different objective with its communication strategy. Mutual coordination in the field of communication is always essential in such a situation.

If the crisis situation is related to a crime (e.g., a major violent crime such as a shooting) where law enforcement work is in progress, always coordinate the details with the relevant representatives of the Police of the Czech Republic. You should take into account that in some cases the coordination team may be working with information that they will not be able to share publicly at the time, so as not to jeopardize the investigation. This is why the selection of the members of the coordination team and mutual trust is absolutely crucial. It is also helpful to be able to identify what you can communicate and what information your staff or students expect from you.

### What is essential for communication in a major situation?

1. **Transparency** - always tell the truth. Even if you can't share all the information with the public or your staff, share as much as you can. Always consult with the press office of the relevant IRS representatives (depending on the type of situation) regarding sensitive information about the incident, the attacker, or perhaps the victims. For internal decisions regarding your organisation's activities, schedule (opening hours in the following days, school timetable and changes, commemo-

# Crisis communication builds trust through repetition.

rative events, etc.), return to routine, assistance provided, etc., inform at your discretion. Honesty and transparency are the right choice.

2. **Repetition** – “no news are news in crisis”. Don’t you have anything new to say? Repeat what you have already said. The surrounding community expects a communication output, even if you have no new news, repeat what has already been said. You also don’t need to report on the incident itself, in the first stages we often don’t even know what has happened. Focus on what you know and what you are doing as a coordination team to get your organisation back into a routine quickly.

3. **Positive language** – phrase your messages positively, the people around you will receive them better. Use words like safe, together, confident, good habits, control over the situation, support, etc.

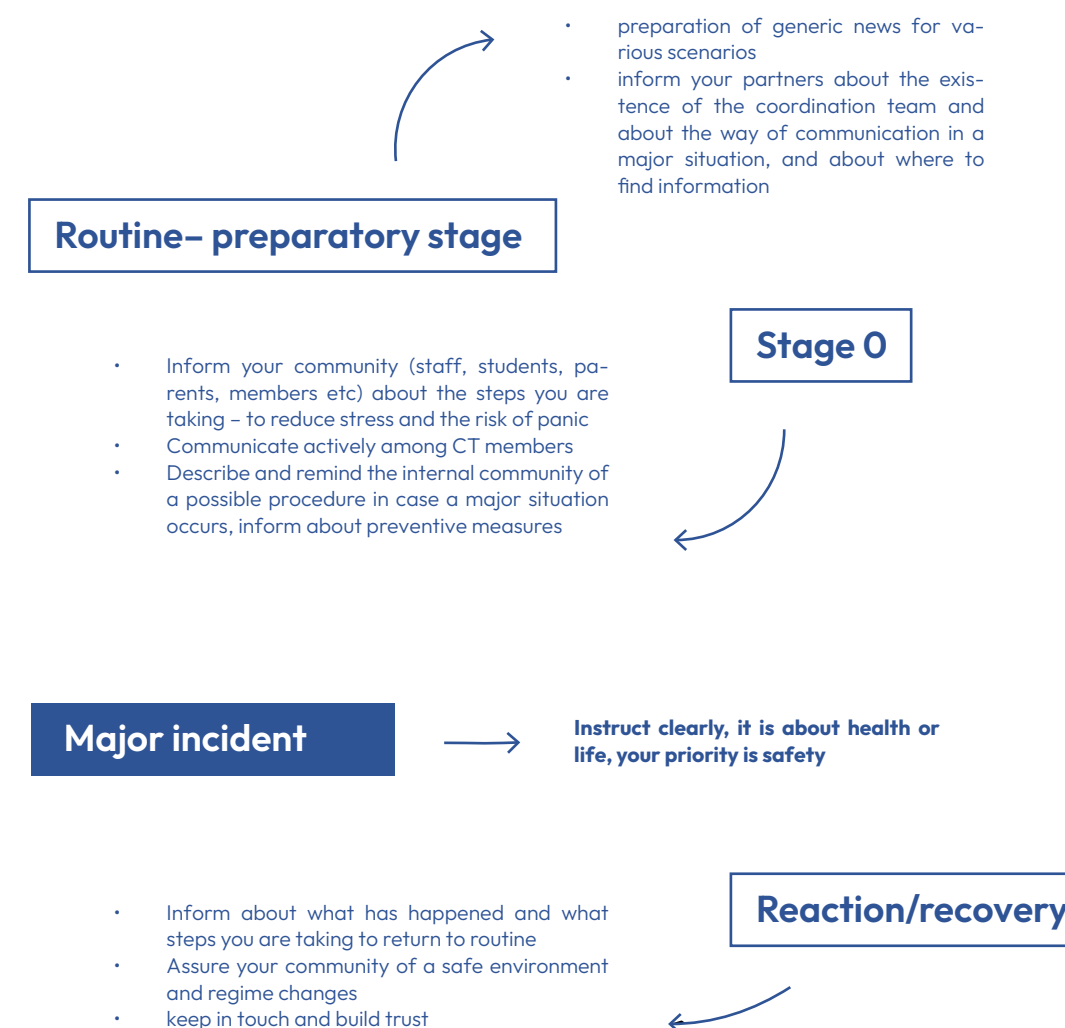
4. **Proactivity** – prioritize communication in a major situation. Who needs to get information first? Who can wait? If you refer your partners to a specific source of information, or announce that an update from your side will follow in 15

minutes, for example, you must keep that promise. It’s not just about providing the information itself; it’s about building credibility. If the information is not there at the announced time, people will most likely find another source of information.

5. **Stage 0** – the above also applies to communication in Stage 0. In this situation, you have a unique opportunity to strengthen the relationship with your partners in less dramatic terms and prepare them for how and where you will communicate the situation if a major incident occurs. It is naive to believe that Stage 0 does not need communication treatment. If you do not share information, people may make all sorts of assumptions as to why this is the case. Have you received a letter threatening of a planned attack against your organization, and the whole affair has appeared in the media? Assure your internal community that you are solving the incident and the situation is under control. It cannot be assumed that an incident in the digital age will be handled well without communication with staff, pupils, parents or clients. Even if you keep quiet about an incident because seemingly nothing happened, people have already read about it in the media or on social media and want to know what is happening, how you are handling the situation and what will happen next. Don’t wait to communicate when a disaster happens.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Mariann Ziss, clinical psychologist and psychotherapist, Safe Communication Method

## Communication priorities in individual stages of a major situation:



### Where to start

Communication in dealing with a major situation is a complex topic. For better clarity, the whole area of crisis communication can be divided into several categories.

1. **Infrastructure** – communication channels and tools we use in a major situation. These can include e-mails, telephone applications, regular or specially installed telephone lines, text messages, live meetings, etc. It is also about setting up the linking of infor-

mation from these channels and the internal processes that define this linking.

2. **Content** – what we communicate and what concrete words we use in this communication, what is our communication priority at a given moment.

Another guiding categorisation is the division into internal and external communication, i.e. the division according to the type of partners.

1. **Internal communication** – communication with people in your internal community, usually staff, students and parents, visitors, shoppers, etc. (depending on the type of soft target)

2. **External Communication** – all other types of recipients with whom you will interact during coordination following a major incident. These include the media, IRS, state and local government agencies, commercial entities, etc.

The last type of communication classification in a major situation is the direction of information flow.

1. **Incoming communication** – usually questions, all information, but also impressions, comments, remarks that

are addressed from groups of people from outside to you.

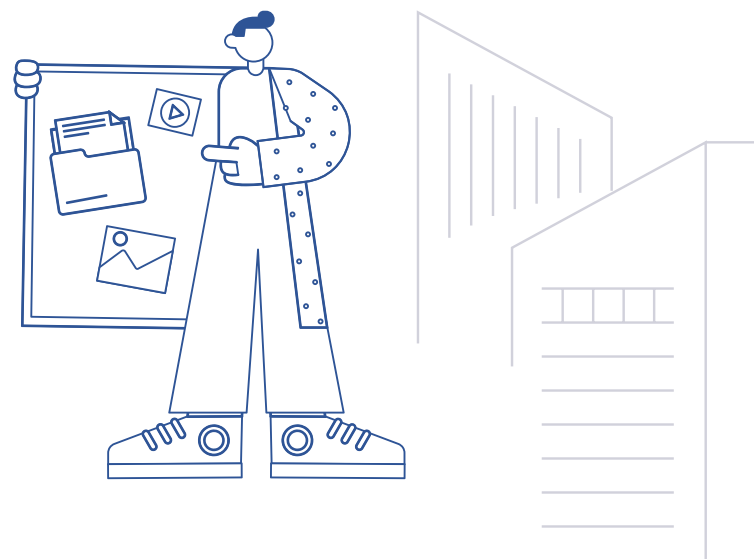
2. **Outgoing communication** – all communication that you, in turn, communicate outward.

The better you treat your communication infrastructure and be proactive in outgoing communication, the less pressure you will feel from incoming communication. In a major situation, people need to get information. If you don't give it to them, they'll go get it themselves, they'll find out your contacts, they'll call you, they'll come to the site of the incident, etc. You can prevent a lot of this just by sharing sufficient information proactively.

If you set for each possible category:

1. a list of partners,
2. preferred communication tools,
3. a communication coordinator responsible for the category within the coordination team
4. and a predefined content of the first messages,

you will have an effective communication protocol for major situations.



# Effective communication protocol :

## Internal / incoming

Content:

- How will we respond to questions from our staff/students about the incident?
- How will we address sensitive issues so that we are consistent in our communication?
- How will we ensure information is shared among team members?

## Internal / outgoing

Content:

- What information do we not/want and can share with pupils, students, parents, staff, members and at what stage?
- Which information needs to go out immediately and which can wait?
- what resources will we refer our internal community to? (Web, emails, etc.)
- what do we want to communicate proactively in stage 0?

## External / incoming

Content:

- How will we respond to media inquiries?
- How will we approve which information is appropriate to share with the public and which is not?

## External / outgoing

Content:

- What media outputs will we do?
- What is our proactive media strategy?
- How do we want to be seen as an organisation in the event of a major situation?



# Practical example:

## Internal communication with the school community (students and parents)

In 2022, the Pardubice Secondary Chemical Vocational School faced a failed bomb attack perpetrated by a student. That day, after placing a bomb made from a pressure cooker near the school, he also murdered a random pedestrian on the street and then committed suicide by poisoning himself with medication. The bomb, which apparently did not explode due to a fortunate coincidence, was found by two students in a container outside the school. The high school dealt with the crisis for several weeks. A coordination team was convened to carefully communicate transparently with students and parents.

“(It helped me) when things weren’t hushed up. When we weren’t treated like dirty dogs who weren’t allowed to know anything. When we knew at least a little bit more than the journalists.” said one of the students when asked what helped him the most during the crisis situation.

In an anonymous survey, nearly 80 percent of parents also said their trust in the school management had not changed as a result of the incident; less than 20 percent said their trust in the school management had actually increased after their experience of dealing with the incident. None of the parents felt that the incident had eroded their trust in the school management, which can be considered a major achievement for the school management in the case of such a major incident. Communication with parents was handled by class teachers, which proved to be a choice that parents appreciated. “In-

ternal communication was actually easy for us. We had it rehearsed, and the crisis management drills turned out to work.”

## Reported bomb at Italian educational campus

A bomb was reported at a Rome educational campus integrating several facilities. After consultation with the police, students and staff move into the sports hall for a limited time. The school management decides not to “spread panic” and refers to the whole procedure as a “drill”. Meanwhile, the media reports on a reported bomb on campus, panicked parents start calling, some arriving on the scene to claim their children. The stress level rises among all involved. The school reports truthful information about the reported bomb, about the solution coordinated with the police, and about the result of the search, which revealed no explosives. After this experience, some parents do not send their children to school the next day. While seemingly nothing has happened, the parents’ trust in the administration is broken. The school announces that it will practice the evacuation procedure. Many parents are absolutely against it, their children are traumatized by the previous situation. This slows down the whole process of improving safety, the school management will have to work hard to build trust again.

## Clear communication kept trust.

# Conclusion

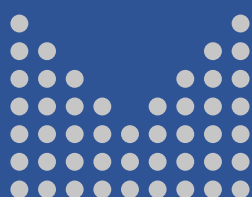
Preparedness for major incidents and subsequent serious situations is a never-ending process and needs to be maintained over time, keeping both documentation and the actual knowledge and skills of team members up to date. External circumstances are constantly changing and evolving, so crisis preparedness itself is a never-ending discipline. For successful crisis preparedness, it is not the methodological details that are most important, but your responsibility for the organisation you lead and the need to be prepared for the unexpected. From this starting point, every other initiative you undertake is based on this.

It is a mistake to assume that you will probably never use the coordination plan and therefore it is not worth investing in your preparedness. Our environment is changing, and although the Czech Republic is

still ranked among the safest countries in the world, security incidents and other major incidents and situations happen and will happen. In cases where you know about them in advance, you can try to pre-empt a major situation by activating the coordination plan as a preventive measure as early as Stage 0.

A proactive and trained coordination team is not just a group of people who get together “when things go wrong”, it is another safety pillar of your organisation. With proper training and coaching, coordination team members become more sensitive and have an overall capacity to address safety issues, can sensitively detect signals of potential problems, are proactive, and elevate the safety culture of you and your organization in a natural way. By doing so, you are effortlessly building your stronger and better resilience and preparedness.





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