The Risk Universe columnist Annie Searle remembers the events of 9/11 and asks whether the lessons learned have also been remembered in driving in. Was Seattle at risk? I was not at that time a member of the bank’s crisis management team, but I was responsible for over 100 people, who looked to me for direction. I can honestly say that most of my expertise as a crisis manager was learned at high cost that day.

People Executives of the bank were huddled up in a makeshift command center, watching a single television set. There were no communications out, either to managers or to employees. Even though there were two tiers of executives who could have communicated – the executive committee or the crisis management team – we were on our own. In retrospect, I believe that executives were trying to gather sufficient information to send out a communication but ended up too horrified and paralysed to act.

Process There had been little or no formal process for recovery from the 6.8 magnitude Nisqually earthquake in Seattle earlier in 2001. And there was none now. Everything was done by the seat of our pants. And the intranet platforms, but it took a long time to locate them because most lines had been knocked out in Manhattan. In those days, SMS messaging was not so common.

External Events The bank had a crisis management team with roughly 23 senior managers as members that would be activated in the event of any major disaster. Crisis management in those days consisted of long conference calls, often scheduled at the same time the lines of business were running their own calls. In theory, information would flow from the lines of business to the crisis management team so that communications could flow to employees. After 9/11, the technology group was asked to appoint two members to the team, and I volunteered along with my colleague, the head of technology infrastructure. We spent several years as committee members trying to winnow down the team and push for more definition – and shorter calls. When eventually, I was asked to take over continuity of operations for Washington Mutual in 2003, I became chair of the crisis management team and reduced the team size for 25 to 8. We never activated the crisis management team unless the line(s) of business faced extra security personnel to monitor a facility that has been damaged; Authorising internal and external communications; Consideration then action on legal advice that may cover a wide range of topics, from liability to reputational risk; Updates to regulators and to boards of directors, so that there are no surprises.”

Some things have changed in that approach over the past five years as I work with various companies to streamline their disaster response.

Names wheeled into the dim warehouse of memory

So many names, there is barely room on the walls of the heart

Billy Collins, The Names