Coping With Disaster

Just 48 hours after a bomb destroyed the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building and killed 18 of her employees, Florence Rogers and the Federal Employees Credit Union were back in business. A carefully thought-out disaster plan made all the difference.

Florence Rogers and seven of her top managers gathered in her office for a meeting moments before the bomb ripped through the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City. All of Rogers' top managers at the Federal Employees Credit Union were women, and since it was the Wednesday after Easter, they happened to be dressed in their Sunday best. So pretty a picture did they make that one vice president commented to Rogers, “Hey, Ms. President, look around the room at all these primary colors we have on today. We look like a basket of Easter eggs, don't we?”

"I looked at everyone of them," Rogers says today, recalling those fateful minutes before 9:02 a.m. when she lost all seven of those women sitting around her desk. “Royal blue, solid red, solid yellow, white, black and two paisleys. I knew what everyone of those girls 5 was wearing, which proved to be valuable later when the medical examiners would recover a body and say, ‘I think we found one of your girls. Do you know what they were wearing?’ And I was able to say, 'Yes, I do.'"

Not only did Rogers survive the bombing of the Murrah building and the deaths of 18 of her 33 employees, but she also was able to get the Federal Employees Credit Union up and running 48 hours and 30 minutes after the blast, thanks to spunk and some sound business decisions made months earlier. The story of Rogers and her credit union is remarkable, considering that experts say 75 percent of all businesses that suffer a major disaster never recover.

After the blast, Rogers never lost consciousness, but found herself clinging to a 16-inch concrete ledge on what was left of the building's third floor. She says all she could see was "blue sky" where her managers had been sitting. It would be hours before she would be rescued and realize that her coworkers were underneath the rubble of the six floors that had fallen on top of them. Still, Rogers says she was determined to rebuild as fast as she could.

"We literally did not have a piece of paper left, not a telephone number - nothing to start back up with," says Rogers, 61, president and CEO of the credit union that does about $75 million in business a year. "But I went to a board meeting at 4:30 p.m. on the afternoon of the bombing and we started to put our business back together. I came back and got to work because I didn't know that I had any other options."

Rogers, who has run the credit union for 25 years, credits a disaster recovery plan she and the board instituted a few years earlier for the credit union's quick rebound, which was made with only 10 percent of its original staff.

Bunkered Data

All of FECU's computer records were stored 12 blocks south of the blast in a 10-foot-thick, reinforced-concrete vault underneath railroad tracks owned by The Rock Island Group, technology consultants in Oklahoma City that also specialize in disaster recovery.

The entire recovery was accomplished with three or four backup computer tapes, says William Towler, chief executive officer of The Rock Island Group. When the blast hit, the consultancy was able to immediately ship a complete set of backups to a facility in Valley Forge, Pa., that used its computers
to retrieve the information. By the next day, records and data were being retrieved, and information lost in the bombing was being restored.

The backup plan cost the credit union $245 a month prior to the blast, mainly for couriers to pick up computer data daily.

Another part of Rogers' standard operating procedure was to keep a copy of the credit union's policy manual at the chairman's house.

"Every time we would change anything, I shipped the changed page to his house," Rogers says. "When he came that afternoon carrying that book, let me tell you, it was a relief. It had all of our personnel policies, our job descriptions and benefits. We were able to give it to volunteers and show them how we did things. It was a real lifesaver."

In what she calls a "spooky coincidence," Rogers had even arranged for supplies to be stored off-site. "We didn't have a lot of space in the federal building to house extra envelopes, extra stationery and extra forms," she says. "That was a streak of luck because the guy that stored all of that in his warehouse was able to bring us checks and computer forms almost instantly."

Luck played a part in the credit union's rebound, too. Among the survivors were Rogers, Vice President and Controller Raymond Stroud and FECU data processing specialist Brad Grant. It was sheer coincidence that Stroud and Grant were both out of town at the time of the blast. When the smoke cleared, the credit union had suffered a stunning loss, but it did have the three key people needed for recovery.

The credit union was under extreme pressure to serve its 15,800 members, many of whom were in the midst of planning funerals for family members who had died in the blast. The Friday after the bombing, there were 500 people in line at the temporary credit union at 9:30 a.m. Ten minutes later, the credit union was open for business.

Rogers says she and her staff felt they had a moral obligation to keep working despite the fact that all of the loan officers - except for one on medical leave - had been killed and that there were sometimes three employee funerals a day in the first two weeks after the blast.

Rogers says the best management decision she made in those early hours after the disaster was "letting somebody else help us with all of this - someone who was not emotionally involved."

A dozen volunteers from other federal credit unions helped in the day-to-day operations for a month. A makeshift loan department on folding tables was set up temporarily at another credit union and run by CEOs from other Oklahoma City credit unions.

Rogers, tall and red-haired, sits in the credit union's new location in Bethany, Okla., 11 miles north of the capital. Scattered, throughout the credit union are ceramic angels sent by well-wishers from around the country. A stern-looking guard - part of the new security precautions - maintains a constant vigil at a desk outside of Rogers' office.

"I only have seven employees out of my original 33," she explains. "All the rest of them left because they couldn't handle the daily grief."
On one wall in Rogers' new office is her 20-year service plaque, mangled and still covered with powdery white dust from the bomb.

It - along with an intact bottle of White Diamonds cologne from her purse - was one of the few things in her office that survived the blast. "Some of my girls were buried without their arms and my cologne wasn't even broken," she marvels.

Rogers suffered only minor bruises and has a little dark spot on her left leg that was permanently tattooed by flying glass.

Rogers says she has a "maternal" management philosophy, which helped her with the emotional rebuilding of her business. In fact, her employees called her "Mother Goose." She talked about that philosophy when she eulogized her slain employees, and she frequently brings it up in conversation today.

"You fly in V-formation, just like geese do," Rogers explains. "And you honk your encouragement to the leader, but when he gets tired, he flies to the back of the line and someone else takes over. That's how we dealt with our day-to-day business and that's how we dealt with the disaster. It proved to be a great comfort, even though my flock is gone."

As part of her personal healing process, Rogers raises guinea hens and peacocks in her garage, tending them carefully after work. And she is on a lecture circuit around the country, speaking to other CEOs and top managers about the experience of losing two-thirds of her staff.

"You can see that these managers are so touched by my story," Rogers says. "I talk to them about disaster recovery, but I also give them some simple advice. I tell them to pick out a couple of employees every day and pat them on the back. Tell your family how much you love them and tell your staff how much you appreciate them. I know firsthand how short life can be."

By Anita Leinert, Management Review, November 1996

Oklahoma City Business: Before and After the Bombing

Cowboys and Indians, flat land, no trees, hazy memories of the Dust Bowl days and a guy named Curly singing "Oklahoma."

Those were most people's perceptions of Oklahoma City, says W. Andrew Burke, senior vice president of economic development for the Oklahoma City Chamber of Commerce.

"And they were largely negative perceptions," Burke notes.

To combat that unfair image, the chamber developed a $2.9 million marketing initiative, which included hiring Development Counsellors International (DCI), a New York consulting firm charged with the job of boosting Oklahoma City's sagging image.

After all, there was lots of positive news to get out, including Oklahoma City's central location in the heartland of America, a labor force that has been named by World Trade magazine as one of the top 10 nationwide for global competitiveness and the ambitious $238 million Metropolitan Area Projects
(MAPS), which includes construction of a new 15,000-seat, minor-league baseball stadium and a downtown library.

Three weeks after the New York consultants swung into high gear on promoting Oklahoma City, the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building was blown up in the worst act ever of terrorism on U.S. soil.

Fourteen months later, the MAPS project is ongoing and chamber officials are upbeat, but the city and business community are still reeling. Among the many new responsibilities of DCI: organizing press credentials for the 1,400 reporters who poured into town to cover the first anniversary of the bombing and making sure visiting reporters get a guided tour of the bomb site.

Vice Mayor Ann Simank, a psychotherapist, says the bomb put "an untold number of people out of business that very day." About 300 businesses downtown were affected by the blast.

Simank says the city is surveying business owners to find out their concerns and needs, but a more urgent priority is getting extra funding for Project Heartland, a federally sponsored program that offers counseling to anyone in the community who is having difficulty adjusting.

At least 30,000 people have called for free treatment since the April 19, 1995, blast, she says. "The business community is still reacting," Simank says. "Some days they say, 'Yes, we will rebuild.' Other days, it's no."

Complicating the recovery are the constant reminders of the bombing. Many downtown buildings that were damaged have still not been repaired, mostly due to a lack of federal funding, according to local business owners. The crumbling Water Resources Board, located across the street from the Murrah Building, has yet to be razed. Hundreds of windows in the downtown area have yet to be replaced.

The site of the bombing, although cleared and surrounded by a chain-link fence, has been turned into a temporary homemade shrine, hung with hundreds of teddy bears, angels, sympathy cards and even cans of Ol' Roy dog food left as a tribute to the police dogs who rescued survivors. At least 40,000 mementos have been left there in the past year. The site of the Murrah building seems to be a bigger tourist draw than the nearby National Cowboy Hall of Fame.

"There are some people in the business community who do not want to let go of what happened," says David Page, editor of the Oklahoma City Journal Record. "You get the sense that it's going to shadow their lives for a long time."

Page was one of 500 people injured in the bombing. His newsroom has been moved several blocks from its original location near the Murrah building, but still contains computer terminals that were chipped and dented in the blast.

Other business leaders are more optimistic than Page. Christopher Salyer, chairman of Accounting Principals and owner of a dozen buildings in the downtown area, is surprisingly upbeat, considering that none of the buildings he owns in the area known as "Automobile Alley" was insured against damage incurred in the bombing. Some may find his remarks callous; in truth, he has a flinty Plains mentality that's probably closer to the pioneers who settled Oklahoma City in the 1889 land rush.

"It was a business risk I was willing to take," Salyer says of his lack of insurance. "And it's never
crossed my mind to pack up and get out. In fact, the renovation of Automobile Alley was sparked by the bombing. Design teams were finally formed to help us get our act together.

"I hate to jump up and down on the graves of 168 people, but some of the greatest fortunes have been made in the greatest times of crisis. The idea of a phoenix rising out of the ashes is very appealing to me."

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**Workbook**

Whether it's a tornado or a terrorist act, businesses need to be ready to cope with the worst-case scenario. Disaster recovery experts and those who survived the bombing offer the following tips:

- **Have a written disaster recovery plan.** "That's the first step," says Jack Querry, chairman of the board of the Oklahoma City Federal Employees Credit Union. "I would recommend they have a detailed, comprehensive plan. And then pray to the Lord you never need to use that plan."

- **Practice disaster drills and define priorities.** William Towler, chief executive officer of The Rock Island Group, a firm that helped the Federal Employees Credit Union cope with the bombing, encourages managers to take employees off-site once a year and walk through a disaster.

  "Vote in advance on all the decisions you'll have to make, from hiring to who is in charge," Towler says. "Make all the hard decisions at that point because it's too difficult to think when half of your people are dead or seriously injured. You go out of business if you don't. Most businesses will never have to cope with a disaster along the lines of Oklahoma City, but the lesson is there are things you can do to prevent a minor problem from becoming a major headache."

- **Seek expert help:** There are several dozen businesses in the United States that specialize in disaster planning. They can be reached through the Association of Contingency Planners in Brigham City, Utah, at 800-445-4227. You may want to subscribe to the quarterly *Disaster Recovery Journal* in St. Louis, Mo. (314-894-0276). The Journal also has a Web site that can be accessed at [http://www.drj.com/](http://www.drj.com/). It provides information on products such as disaster training tapes and links to disaster recovery service providers.

- **Reassess your insurance coverage.** Kenneth Walker, vice president of Walker Stamp and Seal, says a "business interruption" insurance policy got his company through the days when customers weren't allowed in the vicinity. Walker Stamp and Seal is located a block away from the Murrah building and sustained heavy damage in the blast. "We ended up losing about 10 working days because our building was considered part of the crime scene," Walker says. "The $20,000 check for business interruption kept us going."

- **Back up, back up, back up.** Make copies of everything and store them off-site. "Keeping them on the premises defeats the purpose," says The Rock Island Group's Towler. Even small businesses should have a backup policy. "Just ask yourself, if I went into work tomorrow and there was no information, what would I do?" says Towler. "That will be the first step in formulating your disaster recovery plan."