



# What Can a Risk Manager Do During a Pandemic?

By Julie Ryan, Managing Partner

As the risk manager, you have served in a planning role and an information gathering role. But now we are in the pandemic, so you may be wondering what your current role should be. The Risk Owners are leading efforts in their respective operational areas, so you may think you need to step aside and let them do their work. But there are important ways for you to help: 1. Be in the war room and 2. Prepare for the next wave.

## Be in the War Room

A colleague recently reminded me of Winston Churchill's "War Rooms", the maze of rooms located underneath Westminster where Churchill and his circle of advisors planned Britain's strategy during the second world war. They were used for the duration of the war, operational the week before Britain declared war on Germany in 1939 and only closed once Japan surrendered in 1945.

As the risk manager, you can be a valuable contributor in the war room. You have spent more time than anyone understanding root causes, risk rankings, and risk priorities. And you are knowledgeable about the various mitigation efforts across the organization. You are also experienced at helping your colleagues apply "what if" thinking in order to develop alternative scenarios.



*You can help in the War Room as you are familiar with the interconnected risks and you have spent more time than anyone understanding the risks.*

The risk owners will be leading various mitigation plans. Perhaps you can be a facilitator to record decisions and disseminate information. Or, maybe you can help with project management, tracking the issues, the solutions, the resources allocated, and the results expected. You may assist with analyzing potential risks associated with the emergency plans. And/or, you can be the historian, noting how events unfolded and how the organization reacted to the externalities, so that the team can explore "lessons learned" later.

<sup>1</sup>Photo: <https://winstonchurchill.org/visit/churchill-war-rooms/>



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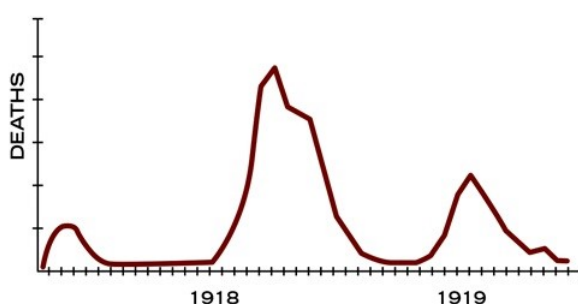
## Prepare For the Second Wave

There is a curious thing about the Churchill War Rooms. After 1945, they were closed *and left intact*. In hindsight, this seems odd, since the end of the second world war was so conclusive. But we see this with the benefit of historical perspective. At the time, they were not too tired to clean it up or were thinking about them as a museum attraction. The war room was still there, should they need it again.

If the corona virus is like the Spanish flu, there could be two more waves to come that may be years apart or months apart- we just don't know at the moment. The CDC describes the Spanish Flu waves: *"There were 3 different waves of illness during the pandemic, starting in March 1918 and subsiding by summer of 1919. The pandemic peaked in the U.S. during the second wave, in the fall of 1918. This highly fatal second wave was responsible for most of the U.S. deaths attributed to the pandemic."* The US government is preparing for the possibility of recurring waves over the next 18 months, and so should you.

*Our ability to respond more quickly today with vaccines and drugs will hopefully dampen any second or third wave. But your role is to consider what could happen and how well the organization is prepared to respond.*

**3 Waves of the Spanish Flu<sup>2</sup>**



It is challenging to conduct a risk review of an unusual situation- where do you begin? Start with an approach with which you and your colleagues are already familiar - the

key risk categories that you initially used to build your organization's risk inventory. This is familiar ground, which will be easier for people to work with, especially given the fatigue that some organizations may face. You could facilitate this review by exploring what the organization experienced in the first wave and then pose questions for preparing for a second wave. This approach will improve upon the first wave response as well as identify gaps that became evident while the organization was undergoing stress. Unlike prior risk inventory discussions and mitigation planning which were "it is highly unlikely, but what if" contemplative discussions, now this is real. These events have been stressful for everyone involved. Some nerves may be a bit frayed and feelings a tad raw. Acknowledge this and make sure the group celebrates the successes that resulted, and then plan for the future waves.

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<sup>2</sup>Center for Disease Control, <https://www.cdc.gov/flu/pandemic-resources/1918-commemoration/three-waves.htm>