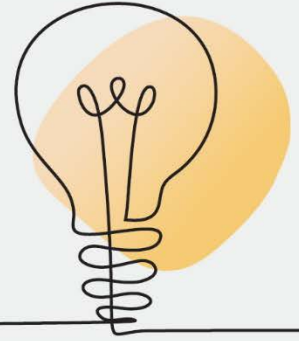


Podcast transcript



Institutional readiness in the face of COVID-19: The experience of National Defence | Reaction

June 2020

Musical intro

Yvon Audette:

Hello everyone and welcome to our podcast series on Institutional Readiness in the Face of COVID-19, where we will explore how our National Defence's resilient core equip it to react, recover from, and begin creating its new reality.

Yvon Audette:

I'm your host today, Yvon Audette, and I am the Chief Operating Officer of KPMG's Management Consulting practice in Canada. I'm here with my colleague, Maria McKay, the Senior Manager in our People in Change practice. And over the course of this series, we will be speaking with Len Bastien, Assistant Deputy Minister and Chief Information Officer, Sophie Martel, Director General of Information Management Technology & Strategic Planning, and Major General Andrew Jayne, Chief of Staff, Information Management, and incoming Cyber Force Commander for the Canadian Armed Forces.

Yvon Audette:

But first, Len, can you tell us a little bit more about yourself and your role at the DND?

Len Bastien:

Hi, Yvon. First of all, thanks for having us. It's often overlooked, the opportunities we get to speak about our role and institutions, but being a CIO and being a CIO organization, it's important sometimes to step back and just realize, and that certainly these events make you realize, your value to the enablement of business, especially the business of Defence.

Len Bastien:

So yes, my name is Len. I've been the CIO of Defence for many years. I sort of started back in the early days and have spent most of my public service career with Defence. In the last few years, it's been a fascinating time as I watched this organization evolve to become more relevant, and ultimately, more valuable to the business. But in very recent times,

obviously, through something like a pandemic, it becomes ground zero of exactly what your role is and the value you bring to an institution, especially an institution like Defence.

Len Bastien:

There's nothing good about this situation, actually. There's a lot of negativity out there, and if you let it overwhelm you, it can be very difficult to deal with. Today, hopefully we'll speak more about the opportunities this crisis has brought in front of this organization, especially the organization and the team I have with me here at Defence.

Len Bastien:

So, yes, thanks for having us and I look forward to the talk this evening.

Yvon Audette:

Great to have you with us, Len. And now Sophie, tell us about your role.

Sophie Martel:

Hi, Yvon. I've been with DND for 31 years, 21 years in uniform, and now I'm lucky, I'm the lucky Director General of Information Management Technology & Strategic Planning. My role really is to enable strategic change management, both from a technology perspective and from a system integration perspective. As such, my division leads IMIT transformation efforts, also coordinates departmental information technology security, and performs engineering and integration of Canadian Armed Forces' IMIT infrastructure while maintaining a client-focused culture.

Yvon Audette:

Thank you very much for those wonderful introductions. So let's start. So how are you doing and holding up during these unprecedented times?

Len Bastien:

Excellent. Thanks for asking. And I hope you and yours are well as we record this podcast. We're doing great. And I found this as a real opportunity for us to step back and have a look at how we manage our lifestyle. You know, our workplaces have somewhat been dictated to us over the past decade or more, and this really did challenge us to think outside the box of what the workplace needed to look like as we entered into a pandemic.

Len Bastien:

As an individual, my family's been great. I've been impressed. My kids have respected the rules. They found a new way to deal with socialization over social media, and my hat's off to them. It can't be easy for that generation.

Len Bastien:

For us, my wife and I both are public servants and we've turned our home into our office, and we compete now for quiet space to have conversations like this one, where we're on the line most of the day with our colleagues and friends from across public service and industry.

Len Bastien:

So it's been a challenging time, but I've got to say, there's been some really bright light. I've been impressed at the amount of work that the team has been able to generate, the amount of energy they can sap out of me some days, even if we're remote and not in front of each other. I never thought working remotely would have been as productive, but it certainly has impressed me that way.

Len Bastien:

You know, as a CIO, you take the job hoping never have to deal with a crisis. A good day is a quiet day. So when this happened, it was in mid-March. I can remember the day. It was Friday the 13th, not that there's anything wrong with that. I was actually born on a Friday the 13th, but it was a specific day and I may never forget it. It was the day the Deputy called us into a special meeting with all the management team and said, "We got to take this Department into BCP mode. And full BCP, not just a little bit. We need to preserve the fidelity and the integrity of the Canadian Armed Forces so whatever comes next, they're ready for it."

Len Bastien:

And those words stuck with me. I was on the phone driving back from Toronto, and I hung up from that call wondering what does this mean? Like what does this really mean? I mean, we can handle a bit of BCP, I think. We can be remote. We can work offline for a while, but what did I just hear and what's about to happen?

Len Bastien:

So it's been an event, it's been a career event I don't think many of us wished for or were fully prepared for, but I think what I've seen anyway, like many times in the public service, is a terrific response. And I'll let the team speak for themselves obviously for their own well-being, but as a CIO

organization, as a Defence team, I've been really impressed. And it's not the first time public service has rallied to a crisis and responded incredibly. They seem to do better actually in crisis than they do normal mode. It seems like when you take the handcuffs off and the rules are changed, they're not a bad outfit.

Len Bastien:

And so it's been obviously a negative environment given the nature of a pandemic, but a very positive experience nonetheless for me. Thanks for asking.

Yvon Audette:

How about you, Sophie? How are you doing and how are you holding up right now?

Sophie Martel:

Yes, Yes. I feel lucky actually. It's good on my side too. I have three kids. They're at home with me today, so hopefully they're not going to make too much noise on this call. And my husband is here too, so family is great.

Sophie Martel:

I have to say that the team is also really excited. We're breaking new ground and our group has really stepped up to support during the pandemic, implementing Defence Office 365 and also additional remote access connectivity. And that's nice to see, so thanks for asking.

Yvon Audette:

Merci, Sophie. So over the past several weeks, my colleagues and I have been speaking with leaders across our country about how this challenging time of disruption has been affecting them as leaders, their organization, their functions, and as people with families, kids, aging parents are suddenly being alone all of the time. As you all know, everybody's personal situation is unique.

Yvon Audette:

What's resonated with people we've spoken to as they try to adjust, adapt, and plan ahead in this state of disruption, is our COVID-19 response to framework. I'm just going to cover an overview here to give you context to our discussion with Len and his team and how they managed through these phases.

Yvon Audette:

First phase, reaction, essentially immediately determining how to deliver programs and services virtually while meeting remote workers' needs.

Yvon Audette:

Resilience, analyzing and implementing financial operational commercial resilience protocols for organizations which look different, whether you're a private sector client or a public sector client.

Yvon Audette:

Recovery, looking at how consumers and citizens will react in the medium to long term. Deciding on required interventions, as well as beginning return to location of work planning.

Yvon Audette:

And finally, new reality, imagining and envisioning the new reality, and experimenting and testing ideas. Example, the need for an overall digital transformation and perhaps more permanent work from home arrangements for certain functions, or building well-designed plans for an inclusive future of work in the organizations.

Yvon Audette:

Len, can you help us with where National Defence is in terms of these phases?

Len Bastien:

Absolutely. The interesting comparison to your framework and to the framework we've come to get to know in Defence is not by name. We call it something a little different. We sort of called it preparedness, alert, response, and then restoration, but it's the same principles if you break it down.

Len Bastien:

Preparedness for us, as obviously a Defence organization, we try to prepare for scenarios proactively and pre-emptively. We don't necessarily imagine the worst case scenario all the time, but we do prepare for it. And so what we call pandemic preparedness was phase one, and we kind of got into that phase earlier in the year, where the organization was sort of watching this evolve globally and our intelligence community was sort of getting us ready for what the scenarios might actually look like.

Len Bastien:

And then for us, that's phase one. Phase two is actually pandemic alert, which is there's a real plausible reality that this is going to affect us. We don't know how much, we don't know when, but it's getting real fast, and that's when we put ourselves on alert. We started to expand remote work to essential and routine services with tight conditions for the essential services to be maintained.

Len Bastien:

Then what happens obviously is the event itself becomes real. And then we immediately move into stage three, which is pandemic response. In this case, it's the response phase where we're now into full BCP mode, we're supporting the business of Defence, essential services only. A little different for Defence, not like many other institutions. We do have the Canadian Armed Forces as one of our front lines of business, obviously the main reason of our existence, and their integrity, their wellbeing, their readiness becomes the focus of the attention during sort of pandemic alert and pandemic response phases.

Len Bastien:

We knew that whether it was another spring of floods or something international, expeditionary, or another domestic crisis, that the Canadian Forces often get called at a time when the normal public service infrastructures collapse or are unable to keep up. So we had to be prepared for the inevitable call for assistance. And that call could come from anyone for anything, and we had to be ready for that.

Len Bastien:

So we entered phase three very, very quickly from the time, the day I described earlier where we were on a call and the Deputy says, "We're going to be the first department in the government who actually invoked BCP and we're sending people home, and we're going to be in stay home, stay safe kind of mode imminently," to pandemic response, where we're now thinking about, "Okay, we're beyond that now, and how do we provide the business of the Canadian Armed Forces?" So within days, we were into phase three.

Len Bastien:

I can tell you today, where we are right now is sort of in that response phase, where we're looking and assessing conditions for some kind of return to work or restoral of service phase, which will come next. We're assessing sort of our readiness as we've involved ourselves in a few requests for assistance already, whether at the provincial government level, both in Quebec and Ontario, and now the business of Defence is starting to think about, "Okay, as the governments provincially and municipally start to come back online, how do we as a federal government institution, how do we as the Defence Department start to bring our services back towards a new normal?"

Len Bastien:

And so, to describe our phase, inevitably in our world, in our doctrine, it kind of sounds like that. Again, recognizing you use the four R's is not all that different. And so for us, we're very much into full-on BCP essential services. Now we have to deal with the reality of the business wants to get back to work and we need to get more people, more of the Defence team has to be brought back online.

Len Bastien:

To give you some metric, an estimated number, I'll throw it out there, is I would guesstimate that in full BCP mode, I know my team, I have 20% of my team activated, 10% has to be on site, so they have to do business that they just can't do remotely. The other half are working remotely very actively. And the rest of the team, the 80% are under strict guidance to stay healthy, stay home, stay safe, and you're on standby, so be ready. And that's the mode we're in and we're sitting in right now, but we're having discussions daily on how we're going to bring more of that standby team back into active duty, and with that, comes the necessary enablement of our business.

Len Bastien:

I'll let the team speak to what kind of technology was required to get that much of our team available remote and at a distance compared to a normal day's work and what the new normal might look like, which in fact is what we're talking about here today. So I'm excited about the opportunity this crisis has presented.

Yvon Audette:

Terrific. Thank you very much, Len. And Maria, can you tell us more about the employee experience framework and how it's aligned to the four phases, both the what Len discussed and the four Rs from a KPMG perspective?

Maria McKay:

Absolutely, Yvon. In this time of uncertainty, the leaders we've spoken to, they're very focused on the employee experience. And for us, that is marrying socio, cultural, environmental and digital tools needed, and the intent is to keep people and teams connected, engaged, and productive. And what this means is being mindful to be supportive of personal situations and adaptable to new needs. It means finding ways to be productive remotely when it might have been previously proved by teams being in chairs. And it means thinking differently about security and data protection risks and enabling technology platform.

Maria McKay:

And so the particular response across socio, cultural, environmental and digital will really depend on where an organization is across the four R phases, and we're really looking forward to hearing more about that.

Yvon Audette:

Thanks, Maria. That's very true. Len, maybe if you can share an example of the needs expressed by your teams.

Len Bastien:

Yeah. Thanks, Yvon. It's been an interesting time. Everything I expected they would need, they didn't need ironically. And then things they did need, which I didn't think they would need, became very real.

Len Bastien:

Early on, I got to give credit to the leadership of Defence, who became very conscious of what comes with the feeling of isolation. We didn't get to choose who stays home and who has to come to work. We had to do that based on essential services to run the business and decisions were made. And not that anybody is not essential, but very much we needed people on standby and clearly we needed people activated. And we started to rotate teams after a week or two because we felt that we needed to share the load.

Len Bastien:

It's not easy working remotely when you've never done it on a full time basis. It's not easy to be isolated from your

coworkers when you're used to having that social atmosphere, that work environment. You may have relied on some more than others for stable and solid mental health. We had to tilt our attention to our people and we became conscious that it wasn't just enough to technically enable them and provide a great environment for them to be able to connect, but it was more about how are they doing? Are they talking? Are they connecting for other reasons other than work?

Len Bastien:

And in fact, I dropped in on a coffee call that one of my directors was having last Friday. He invited me. He never expected me probably to drop in, but I have the time and it made sense. And I really wanted to, just to see how the staff were doing. We had about 50 people, many who am I've either met quickly or maybe never met. And we had a great conversation about the fire ban and barbecues and different things we'd never ever talked about at the water cooler at work, and it just felt like people were embracing this new way of working and socializing.

Len Bastien:

So to get back to your question, what have we noticed, we have to maintain connectivity to our people, regardless of if it's work-related, where you just need to talk to them once a week or a couple of times a week on standby mode to make sure they are healthy and they're doing well. Not everybody's in the same situation, is what we came to realize quickly.

Len Bastien:

For those who are working, we had to make sure that they pushed away on weekends. When you're stuck to your phone and you got earphones and a mic on your head all day, Friday night, when work was done, people had to take those headphones off and put their phone on the table and go sit down with their family and enjoy a meal and not really look at it for the weekend unless it was super critical. And I noticed people were kind of... Days were blending together. Weeks were blending together. Weekends were the same routine as weekday.

Len Bastien:

And so, we had to deliberately structure our meetings, our conference calls and our interventions to shut people down, to say, "Look. Okay, we're done for the week. Thank you very much. Have a great weekend. Go enjoy your families." If you didn't do that, people just didn't know how to work remotely. It's a whole new work/life balance.

Len Bastien:

Now, it can be great. It can be very beneficial if you figure it out and make it work for you, but I noticed it was challenging for some more than others. Other people just didn't like the change in routine. They really wanted to come back to work. They were frustrated we weren't letting them in the buildings. They didn't want to be considered non-essential, and indeed they weren't, so we quickly stopped saying anything.

We just stopped using the word essential and just said, "Look, no, you're on standby. Stay healthy is your job. We'll need you, the Defence team will need you at some point in this return to work strategy," and we're getting there now. And I think they'll realize in the coming weeks what we meant by staying healthy and being ready to come back to us.

Len Bastien:

It's been about the people. It's really been a learning experience. At first, as a CIO, I was consumed with making sure the systems were available, the connections were being made. People were able to be essential. Essential services were supported by the people who could support them. I quickly realized that there's a people aspect to this huge chain and changes should never be taken for granted. It can be wonderful, but it needs to be managed.

Len Bastien:

And so that's one of the big lessons learned I took away from this. I was keeping a journal in the first few weeks, just realizing things that I may never, in my career, I've certainly never seen an event like this and I may never see another one, knock on wood. Some key things and key moments during the management of this crisis, I found within 10 to 14 days, people became very anxious and nervous and there was a bit of a hill they had to get over and so forth.

Len Bastien:

So I think there's a lot for us to look back on when this is over and learn from our people's perspective and the psychology of managing through these kinds of ordeals. What's really going to be cool is that the new normal might not look anything like the old normal, and that has to be a positive message and a real change, a managed changed event.

Yvon Audette:

Great. Well thanks, Len. It's very clear that the Department of National Defence and the Canadian Armed Forces understands the need to institutionally ready. And it looks like you guys are going to be the North Star for others to follow. In your case, resilience is a state of being, so it's our hypothesis that your journey has been more one of react, recover, and plan for the new reality. Can you share with us a little bit of the resilience of Defence and forward thinking of your leadership, you've touched on a few of those already, that makes you ready to make the journey through the phases of response?

Len Bastien:

Yeah. Thank you. And again, going back to the way Defence plans and prepares, we were imagining the worst months before the main event actually happened. And we'd like to believe we were prepared, but like I said, from a CIO perspective, can you imagine having to invoke some level of BCP and realize you're supporting essential services? But you imagine situations where a building is offline or potentially a small city, or a strike event where there's a percentage of

your workforce that can't get in, so you have to make sure they can work out otherwise.

Len Bastien:

When you say you're going to take a department the size of National Defence, over 120,000 individuals connected to us, and the Civilian Reserve, our full time ranked Force members, it's like saying the town that Kingston, Ontario, is now about to turn off 80% of their lights. And you need to make sure that things work with the 20% that are going to hang back, and it's not a small and irrelevant undertaking.

Len Bastien:

So planning was essential. The institution I thought has been incredible. Again, being connected to the military, one thing I've learned over many years of working with them is they're terrific planners. I do spend a significant amount of time planning, architecting, crafting. They never go out the door without every possible odd in their favor, having looked through and been prepared to the best of our ability as a Defence team.

Len Bastien:

So when this came along, it's kind of the same answer. Through the early days of preparedness, the Department imagined what it might need from us. Now, I'm going to say Andrew will speak to some of the events that were eye-opening for us getting close to the event, which we didn't know exactly when it would happen, and that was an eye-opening moment where you realize, "Hm, maybe we didn't quite have enough of this particular capability ready to go."

Len Bastien:

But what's happened is, since then, is the reaction. Now that we've entered into the crisis, we've survived initial contact with BCP mode, and the institution seems to be functioning. Clearly, the CAF has been called upon and responded. And so, we believe we've successfully delivered essential services.

Len Bastien:

Now, we have to plan a resumption and how do we get restoration? How do we get back into the work? What is the modernized workplace we've evolved into and how much of it do we take forward with us? Do we keep evolving towards that new environment that we've discovered almost by accident, or do we revert back to our legacy environment and good old way of doing things, maybe that's the comfortable way for some?

Len Bastien:

Those are the planning stages we're at today. It's a very different on getting ready and it's a very different conversation we're having with the business and our folks on the technology side.

Yvon Audette:

Thank you very much, Len. This concludes part one of our podcast, Institutional Readiness in the Face of COVID-19, the Experience of National Defence.

Musical exit