SMRT’s expensive lesson spells free tuition for everyone else

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SINCE the trains ground to a halt last December, other firms have had little opportunity to wallow in schadenfreude as they scurry to avoid becoming the next SMRT.

Against the backdrop of SMRT’s public grilling, firms with infrastructure at stake are quietly looking for their own Achilles heel. CrisisAsia Pte Ltd reported a 20 per cent increase in inquiries after the service disruptions.

“A training programme we plan to conduct on Crisis Simulation Exercises (CSX) scheduled for early August is still attracting interest and registration, partially driven by the MRT disruption incident,” said Clifford Seow, regional director for CrisisAsia.

Training Edge International senior consultant Louie Tai has been working with the people behind Sentosa’s monorail. “They are making preparations to make sure that they are not caught offguard,” Mr Tai said.

Even if outside help is not being sought, meetings are being convened and procedures reviewed, he said. “There is a fair bit of work being done discreetly. Firms want to avoid a similar situation.”

For companies trying to make sure their organisation does not break down even when their machines do, the Committee of Inquiry (COI) report released last week would have been a wealth of information. As SMRT staff fought to manage mounting confusion on the first day of service disruptions, then-SMRT CEO Saw Phaik Hwa was at the Singapore Art Museum, hosting a company event. The COI report said that Ms Saw decided to stay at the event because “the magnitude of the disruptions was not known yet”.

“She was comfortable leaving the situation in the hands of SMRT’s senior train management. She received regular updates from the head of crisis communication,” the report said. Ms Saw was also updated by two other vice-presidents.

“It is extremely important for the company figurehead to be highly visible during a crisis. This instills confidence across the spectrum of stakeholders,” CrisisAsia’s Mr Seow told BT.

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“The visibility of the company’s figurehead during a crisis would have signalled a commitment to governance and oversight.”

As the night of Dec 15 wore on, internal chaos grew. Calls by train officers to the operations control centre went unanswered. The ones who did get through had to use their own mobile phones after finding that the batteries in their portable radio sets were flat.

At the stations, the station managers were told to detrain passengers, but not why. The Newton station manager was swamped by commuters wanting answers on the platform, but he was “as lost as them”, he testified.

At the COI hearing, the station manager for Marina Bay station said: “I’m on the ground and what (information) I need is how long is the delay going to be, and what is roughly the fault . . . Obviously I wouldn’t tell this to the passenger, but at least . . . I will know how to explain . . . in the more layman context.”

“Because passengers, they don’t only ask you where to go. First, they will scold you. Okay. Then after that they will say, ‘What for?’” he added.

As the operator tussled with rogue collector shoes and third rails, it appeared to have lost its grip on what ground staff and commuters needed.

“Clearly, the root of the problem is the lack of internal communication, and more so the lack of training and preparation for such emergencies. It is critical for frontline staff to have clear instruction on how to manage emergency situations,” said Marina Matthews, managing director at Chrysler Communications.

There were also instances in which standard operating procedures for emergencies, written in a time of calm, became irrelevant in the eye of chaos. While the operations control centre is technically tasked to inform the police in such situations, chief controller Quah Siew Chee explained why this was near-impossible during the train disruption.

“I’m busy handling the incident. I don’t have time to start calling police, calling land transport operations centre, because from my past experience, the moment I start calling them, they will drag down my time,” he said. “They will start asking what was the problem, what’s the detail of the problem, what happened, this and that.”

The gulf between written procedure and highly wrought situations might not be unique to SMRT, said Training Edge International’s Mr Tai.

“In Singapore, we’re very fond of having process after process. While that is good as a guideline, I think it removes the human touch, the ability to anticipate the unforeseen,” he said.

His observation of how firms tend to handle crises is supported by Lee Pui Mun, vice-dean of SIM University’s School of Business. “Very often, organisations have elaborate crisis management plans in place, but organisations have to understand that plans have to be executed by humans and it is therefore imperative that employees at all levels are regularly trained,” Associate Professor Lee said.

If any manuals on how to handle emergencies existed at a higher level, they did not find their way to the people manning the trains. One train officer told the COI that there were no manuals for dealing with emergency situations, apart from remedying train faults and reporting everything to the train service controller.

“This asymmetry in knowledge might have something to do with how resource-heavy it can be for training to trickle down,” Prof Lee observed: “(These are) resources that can be used for more productive initiatives. Hence, in many cases, the knowledge and techniques for crisis management remain with senior management when, in fact, ground staff are the front-liners.”

Other firms that have watched the fallout and are now contributing to the sudden interest in crisis management training no doubt see this money as well spent.