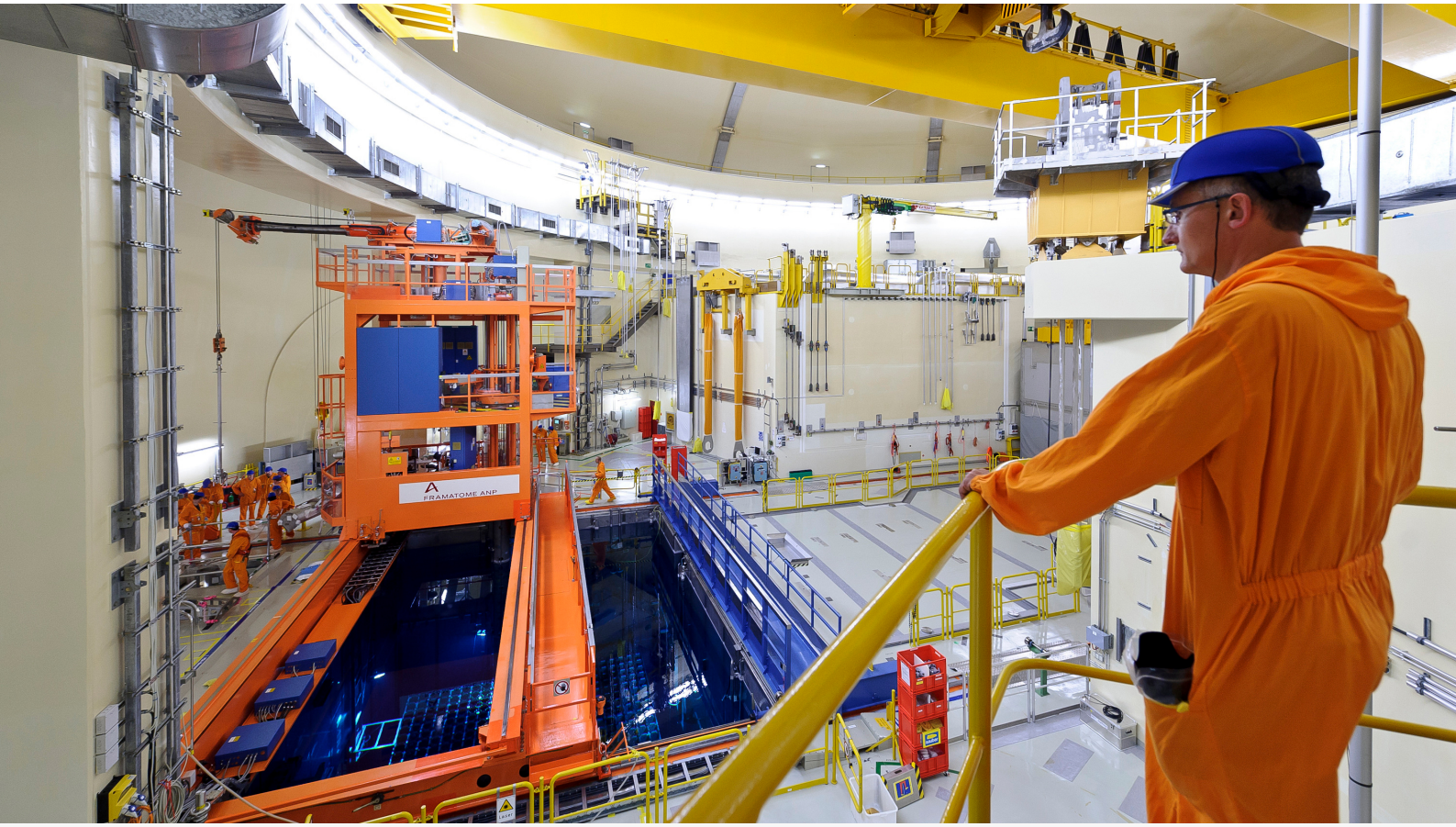

A Plan for Everything

This article reflects the status at the time of its publication. The content may since have become outdated.

09/07/2020 Critical service providers like the RWE utility company need to be especially well prepared for emergencies. Precise and detailed planning ensure that they can respond rapidly to unexpected events.

The alarm sounding loudly at RWE's headquarters in Essen startles everyone on the teleconference, whether they're at the site themselves or connected from other locations. "That came right on cue," remarks Dr. Cord-Henrich Lefhalm, a mechanical engineer and physicist who has just been describing the utility company's emergency plans, including those for the coronavirus pandemic. As division head of decommissioning and dismantling for RWE Nuclear GmbH, he is supervising the overall process of dismantling RWE's five nuclear power stations by the mid-2030s. That task is based on a decision in 2011 by the German government to phase out the country's nuclear power facilities. When the coronavirus pandemic broke out, Lefhalm became the head of RWE Nuclear's crisis management team and therefore also a member of the crisis team for the entire RWE Group.

The company's four subsidiaries—RWE Renewables, RWE Generation, RWE Power (to which RWE Nuclear belongs) and RWE Supply & Trading—provide around forty-three gigawatts of electricity to households in Germany, Europe, and the US. In the fall of 2019, RWE entered an agreement with the German energy group E.ON to take over the latter's entire portfolio of renewable energies, which made it one of Europe's three largest providers in the field. RWE is also number two in the world in the offshore wind energy sector. The RWE Group expects to become climate-neutral by 2040. It employs a total of around 20,000 people and is one of the critical companies as defined by Germany's Federal Office for Information Security (BSI). "Our top priority is to maintain the power supply under any and all circumstances," says energy specialist Lefhalm.

Information within an hour

There are many dangers that might have triggered the alarm at RWE headquarters, but Lefhalm and the other participants in the teleconference respond calmly. The crisis manager keeps the conference going on his smartphone as he walks rapidly out of the building. The alarm soon turns out to be a relatively harmless interlude. An emergency fire door had been opened improperly, and the employees are now returning to their offices. Handling all problems promptly—there's nothing haphazard about that at RWE Nuclear. Instead, the ability is the result of constant practice and sophisticated planning. "Our manuals contain precise instructions for emergencies and they're available both electronically and as traditional paper binders," says Lefhalm.

That is especially true for his own area of responsibility, nuclear energy. Every nuclear power station has a decentralized crisis management team in addition to the central crisis management team at Group headquarters. All sites have shelters for the employees, who in extreme cases can shut themselves into the power station and maintain operations.

Crisis management at RWE involves employees from all levels of the hierarchy, and is made up of different teams. It is important for everyone to receive detailed information and be able to respond rapidly, says Lefhalm. "We plan for specific nuclear power-related scenarios and use simulators to practice different emergencies several times a year. Regulatory bodies are also included in these measures." They cover everything from minor disturbances like doors left open by mistake to the worst possible accidents. But the latter are essentially out of the question. The plans also specify how information flows from staff members all the way up to board members. "The relevant board members are informed about any incidents within an hour at most and can decide on what steps to take," Lefhalm explains. "A computerized system makes sure the information moves quickly, and automatically convenes the central crisis management team."

Planning is more important than vision

Good planning and efficient implementation are the key components of crisis management. This view is shared by experts in organizational psychology such as Gianpiero Petriglieri, a psychiatrist and associate

professor of organizational behavior at INSEAD Business School, whose main campus is in Fontainebleau near Paris. According to Petriglieri, real leadership is not primarily a matter of vision. While a vision can inspire, motivate, and foster hope among employees, it is less important than a practice known to psychologists as “holding.” The ability of leadership personnel to “hold” includes accepting employees' emotions, conveying a sense of reality, and guiding them to take appropriate action. Without preparation and planning, it not possible to take clear and structured action in emergency situations—and therefore also impossible to do a convincing job of “holding.”

That is especially applicable to pandemics, which are invariably associated with a fear of contagion and its consequences. RWE had also laid preparations for these types of situations. It had updated its planning in connection with the SARS epidemic of 2002 and 2003, during which a variant of SARS-CoV was spreading primarily in Asia. “Back then we were already determining what we needed to safeguard our employees in a pandemic, especially with respect to face masks and disinfectants,” says Lefhalm. As soon as information about the dangerous new virus appeared in early 2020, the crisis management teams at RWE Nuclear took organizational precautions to ensure both operations and occupational safety. “That includes temperature checks at site entrances and strict self-quarantine regulations.”

The pandemic has led to new knowledge. “We’ve learned how important it is to coordinate our efforts on an international scale,” says Lefhalm. “The same challenges keep arising everywhere in crises, especially our obligations as employers to take care of our workers while also supplying our customers and providing the energy that allows our economy to run smoothly. That only works on the basis of international cooperation. We have to share our experience and learn from each other.”

Emergency culture enables rapid responses

Comprehensive measures have enabled RWE Nuclear to remain free of any Covid-19 cases in the months following the outbreak. “We work on closed premises with high safety standards, which makes the situation somewhat easier for us than other branches of industry,” observes Lefhalm. Despite that, many employees have been indirectly affected by the pandemic. Nuclear power plants have to undergo extensive inspections every year. They are removed from the grid while thousands of individual components such as pumps, fuel rods, valves, condensers, and motors are checked. Only after all details of the audit are completed and an auditor and the relevant regulatory agency have given their approval may the plant go back on the grid. This is an enormous project that can bring a thousand additional workers onto the site under normal circumstances. “That's not feasible with the coronavirus in play,” says Lefhalm. “So we had to completely change our plans. That meant a lot of extra work, but our employees didn’t hesitate in the slightest and were 100% on board.” The inspection of the Emsland nuclear power station that was successfully concluded in May 2020 under strict safety measures is an impressive demonstration of purpose. For projects of that type to work, it is essential to have a strong emergency culture and for the employees to appreciate the importance of their roles. Something like that cannot be introduced overnight—which is yet another reason why RWE Nuclear continues to practice how to handle every conceivable emergency situation.

Info

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Jan Boris Wintzenburg

Director Communications and Marketing
Porsche Consulting GmbH
+49 (0) 152 3911 8663
jan_boris.wintzenburg@porsche-consulting.com

Image Sublines

Path: A Plan for Everything/Images/img_1.jpg
Title: Dr. Cord-Henrich Lefhalm, Division Head Decommissioning and Dismantling, RWE Nuclear, 2020, Porsche AG
Subline: Zur Sicherheit der Rolls-Royce-Mitarbeiter werden für bestimmte gemeinsame Montageschritte mobile Plexiglas-Trennwände eingesetzt, wie hier bei der Kerntriebwerksmontage eines „Trent XWB"-Triebwerks am Rolls-Royce-Standort in Derby, Großbritannien. Foto: Rolls-Royce

Path: A Plan for Everything/Images/img_2.jpg
Title: Nuclear power station, 2020, Porsche AG
Subline: Safety first: Nuclear power stations like this one in the northwestern Emsland region are part of Germany's essential infrastructure. Critical service providers like the RWE utility company need to be very well prepared for emergencies

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