

Reframing the Organizational Exigency:
Taking a New Approach in Crisis Research

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Crisis research continues to develop as an area of concern and interest. How a crisis is conceptualized and perceived shapes the way in which researchers study the exigency and come to understand the organizational response. There are three guiding premises in this chapter: First, scholars working on crisis research have focused on the methods and symbols organizations may use to prepare for and respond to crisis situations. Second, because most of the research has focused on effective crisis response mechanisms and the need for crisis containment, crisis situations have been treated as isolated events rather than necessary correctives that are interrelated with the culture and history of the organization or industry. And third, as the conceptualization of crisis changes, the types of research questions that are salient also change. These questions have implications both for the direction of crisis research and for how public relations practitioners and organizational leaders engage in crisis management.

The crisis literature is replete with studies and suggestions demonstrating the value of both crisis preparedness and planning (Quartantelli, 1988). Much of the information has been garnered from organizational case studies utilizing public information (i.e., in many cases media reports) to gain insights and draw conclusions about an organization's response or lack of response to crisis situations (Bensen, 1988; Berg & Robb, 1992; Frame, Nielsen, & Pate, 1989; Hall, 1991; Ice, 1991; Sen & Egelhoff, 1991; Williams & Treadaway, 1992).

These approaches to crisis communication, however, underscore and emphasize the uncertainty of crisis situations, the negative nature of crisis, and the need to return the

organization to the status quo or an improved position. David Hurst (1995) underscored this in his book on crisis and organizational change, when he noted, “Crises and surprises have usually been regarded as dysfunctional” (p.118). Thus, although many studies give insights into the negative nature of crisis and practical advice concerning the organizational response, these same studies have become the lens that now seems to limit how a crisis can be understood, potentially predicted, and perhaps even valued.

The State of Crisis Management Research

Crisis situations vary in definition and type. They span the globe and differ in magnitude and impact. From gas leaks in Bhopal to gas attacks in Tokyo to oil spills in Alaska, to earthquakes in Los Angeles, organizational crisis situations may be intentionally or unintentionally created. During the last century, particularly the last two decades, organizational crises have continued to grow both in size and number. Crisis situations have threatened the survival of a number of organizations and often the safety of individuals within society. Many large organizations experience crisis situations on an annual basis (Mitroff, Pauchant, & Shrivastava, 1989). As a result, crisis management has become a growing topic of study.

Several prominent definitions identify characteristics of an organizational crisis. Egelhoff and Sen (1992) in their conceptualization of crisis built on a definition by Hayes (1985): “Crises arise when there is a major incongruence between the expectations of a corporation and what happens in the environment” (p. 36). Egelhoff and Sen (1992) differentiated crisis typologies, arguing that unique variables create and define each type of crisis. Billings, Milburn, and Schaalman (1980) discussed the organizational exigency as an event or situation with limited resolution time that could create an important loss for the organization. Hermann (1963) noted that crisis, “(1) threatens high-priority values of the organization, (2) presents a restricted amount of time in which a response can be made, and (3) is unexpected or unanticipated by the organization” (p. 64).

Although crisis situations differ in size and scope, a number of interrelated variables have been identified as occurring in most crises. First, a crisis situation is often unexpected within the organization (Hermann, 1963; Richardson, 1992; Tortorella, 1989; Wisenblit, 1989). Second, exigencies force the organization to change its immediate approach to information processing (Hermann, 1963; Smart & Vertinsky, 1977; Tjosvold, 1984). Finally, as organizations cope with crisis situations those in leadership narrow their communication channels, thus changing the way information is distributed (Hermann, 1963; Tjosvold, 1984). Although theorists differ on the types of phases or stages that mark the evolution of a crisis, many agree that crisis situations seem to have marked stages from development to resolution (Fink, 1986; Slatter, 1984; Sturges, Carrell, Newsom, & Barrera, 1991). The one point (or phase) that has the broadest level of apparent agreement is that crisis situations do have a resolution point (Fink, 1986; Milburn, Schuler, & Watman, 1983a, 1983b; Sturges, et al., 1991).

Most of the discussion concerning the organizational crisis has focused in two areas: preparing for the event, and responding to or managing the crisis situation (Quarantelli, 1988). It has been argued that the research surrounding crisis management draws from no established paradigms but can be delineated by two perspectives--the technical and the symbolic (Coombs, 1994). The symbolic focuses on the use of language to influence perceptions of the organization and crisis. The technical is directed at crisis preparation and planning.

Regardless of how crisis management has been delineated, a number of themes recur. The crisis management plan has been discussed within a variety of contexts (Barton, 1991; Fink, 1986; Flecker, 1990; Hall, 1991; Markwood, 1988; Milburn et al., 1983; Quarantelli, 1988; Sen & Egelhoff, 1991; Seymour, 1991; Smart & Vertinsky, 1977; Sturges et al., 1991; Wisenblit, 1989). Research validates the importance of the crisis management plan, or advanced crisis planning, particularly with regard to product disasters (Wisenblit, 1989). Preplanning allows those responding to the crisis to have a

measure of certainty in the midst of chaos. The preparation provides the decision maker with a framework from which to see the crisis, and thus lessens the response uncertainties. However, crisis planning does not offer the organizational leadership any guarantee of successful resolution (Quarantelli, 1988).

The crisis response has also received attention. Communication that explains the crisis or provides meaning to internal and external publics is perceived as being vital for organizational success (Barton, 1990, 1991; Benson, 1988; Coombs, 1995; Egelhoff & Sen, 1992; Fink, 1986; Flecker, 1990; Ice, 1991; Markwood, 1988; Seymour, 1991; Sturges et al., 1991; Tortorella, 1989; Weinberger, Romeo, & Piracha, 1991; Williams & Treadaway, 1992; Wisenblit, 1989). Initially, the crisis literature focused on broad response strategies, but increasingly crisis response strategies are narrowing. This narrowing includes: typologies of crisis situations with specific information-processing characteristics (Egelhoff & Sen, 1992); various types of rhetorical or impression management strategies (Allen & Caillouet, 1994; Coombs, 1995; Hobbs, 1995; Ice, 1991; Williams & Treadaway, 1992); and specific managerial behaviors that may accompany crisis situations (Benson, 1986; Slatter, 1984).

The implicit and often explicit goal that marks the crisis literature and research is the desire to return the organization to the status quo, or better yet to a point where public opinion is more positive after the crisis concerning the organization. Sturges et al., (1992) made this point clear, "Beyond physically coping with the aftermath of a crisis, the objective of crisis management is to influence public opinion to the point that post crisis opinions of any constituent audience are at least as positive, or more positive, or not more negative, than beforehand" (p. 23). A few attempts have been made to link the crisis to the organizational culture--changes in the culture needed prior to the crisis situation or in light of the crisis situation (Hurst, 1995; Mitroff, Puachant, Finney, & Pearson, 1989; Silva, 1995). However, most of the current research focuses on either

influencing internal and external publics during the crisis and in its aftermath or on making the correct decision in response to the crisis situation.

Theorists describe in neutral terms the pros and cons of using various public relations and management strategies in their discussion of the pragmatics of crisis. This neutrality demonstrates little or no regard for the ethical implications of assisting an organization in crisis. Egelhoff and Sen (1992) noted in their conclusion that their crisis contingency model, “suggests that firms need to design systems that are within the bounds of the organization’s information-processing capability, if they hope to engage in responsible crisis management” (p. 480). Their article is indeed successful as one of the best “attempts to develop a broad contingency theory about corporate crises and crisis management” (p. 479); but, like most articles dealing with crisis, it does not delineate in any detail “responsible” versus “irresponsible” crisis management. Delineations of this nature could lead to a broader understanding of how a crisis is framed and understood.

The Crisis as a Necessary Corrective

When a crisis occurs the immediate response most often targeted by researchers is the way an organization can act responsibly and effectively. Image management strategies and crisis management plans provide the organizational leadership with a means to identify successful communication strategies and information processing networks.

These plans may return the organization to the status quo, but also prompt an improved position in the marketplace. However, this perspective of studying and practicing crisis management implicitly assumes... that the organization has a right to life; and that the crisis incident is an isolated event with little or no relationship to a faulty organizational culture.

An example of this type of thinking may be instructive at this point. In a recent study of public relations practitioners (Bechler, 1995), a practitioner was asked: What is your overarching goal in helping a client respond to a crisis? The response was: “The terms are usually stop the bleeding. It is damage control at first. You have to make sure

your first actions don't magnify the problem or compound the problem. [The] First thought is to look at all the effective audiences and try to put yourself in their place and find out what they are thinking. [The] Goal is to get back to business as usual and get the whole issue off the table."

One of the problems with current crisis research and practice (as this public relations practitioner unknowingly acknowledged) is not that practitioners and researchers seek to stop the bleeding or help an organization provide a strong first response (the need for organizational assistance during a crisis is beyond question); rather, the point of contention comes in how crisis management is perceived, pursued, and then evaluated. A significant problem occurs when the crisis is viewed only as an obstacle to be controlled, contained, and put "off the table."

This type of conceptualization divorces the exigency from the context of the organizational culture and its corresponding norms, roles, traditions, and values. When this occurs, crisis management or crisis communication may help the organization overcome "a dysfunctional incident" and perhaps even maintain a positive reputation, but never really deal with the internal problems that prompted the event in the first place. A crisis management strategy based on this conceptualization (a one-size-fits-all approach) while providing a short-term solution to the "current" organizational problem, may in fact reinforce patterns that lead to an even greater and potentially more damaging crisis.

This approach (often unintentionally) takes a linear, singular cause perspective (Crisis event>Correct response to the event>Resolution and return to the status quo). By treating the crisis as an isolated event to be dealt with using symbolic and technical strategies, it fails to account for the systemic nature of organizational life. Rarely do events have singular causation, most "incidents" come to life through the organizing actions of numerous individuals throughout the system. Weick's (1988) discussion of organizational sensemaking and the numerous variables involved in responding to a crisis (i.e., commitment, organizational expectations, etc.), exemplifies the multilayered,

interrelated nature of organizational life. Thus, individuals within the organization foster a framework where multiple causation is inherent to most crisis situations.

These crisis situations may be provoked through ongoing, interrelated, organizationally rewarded behaviors that are dysfunctional, unethical, and even immoral. The crisis may appear to have singular causation, the death of a founder or an accident of terrible proportions. But, over time (and often through later study), the event is seen as being symptomatic of larger organizational problems. For example, unethical or dysfunctional patterns of leadership may show up only when the founder creates a crisis through death or departure (e.g., Robert Maxwell's suicide and the ensuing financial collapse of his communications empire). Sexist and racist behaviors or standards may be scrutinized only when a crisis brings them to light (e.g., the racist behavior at the Denny's Restaurant in California). Finally, the disregard for product safety ratings and the ongoing filtration of important information may only show up when a terrible accident occurs (e.g., the Challenger accident). These examples of crisis events illustrate the integrated nature of the incident and the organizational system and culture.

In these situations, the event is damaging to the organization, but it may also be of value both on micro (to the organization) and macro (to society at large) scales. Although initially painful, crisis situations can have long-term value. Without crisis, much needed organizational change may not occur, or may be very slow in coming. David Hurst (1995) noted a number of organizations that either developed during times of societal crisis (the Quakers in preindustrial England), or which experienced positive internal change and increased effectiveness as a result of a precipitating crisis (Russelsteel, Nike, Chrysler, General Motors, and G.E., to name a few). He argued that organizations like ecosystems go through a life cycle where crisis is an important and necessary phase in ongoing growth and life.

Research by Frame, Nielsen, and Pate (1989) concerning the organizational change that occurred in a Chicago Tribune printing plant reinforces this argument. They

studied an ongoing labor crisis within the printing plant. The crisis in this case was the catalyst for increased effectiveness and productivity. Their findings, like Hurst's (1995), demonstrated the potentially transformational nature of an exigency.

In many ways, this view of the organizational crisis is comparable to the perspectives found within the literature on conflict. The research on conflict (Folger, Poole, & Stutman, 1993) has identified a number of variables that could be related to how the organizational crisis can and should be viewed; Conflict is inevitable. Every organization will face crisis. Conflict often brings about innovation. Crisis situations can bring about important institutional changes and much needed innovation. Conflict can further develop and broaden important relationships within the organization. Crisis situations can increase team effectiveness and improve relationships between those within the organization and between internal and external publics. Hurst (1995) provided a fascinating example of this set of outcomes in his discussion of Russelsteel. Although many aspects of conflict are dangerous and dysfunctional, conflict within the literature is perceived to be relationally and organizationally important.

Crisis situations can play a similar role in organizational life, and the literature needs to develop this perspective. By focusing mainly on crisis containment and image management, researchers and practitioners may be encouraging change-resistant cultures to maintain patterns of behavior and communication that are damaging to those without power in the organization and to society as a whole. Reframing the popular view of crisis so that it is also perceived as a necessary and important corrective is a step toward better understanding how organizations can respond effectively to chaotic and harmful situations. Changing the way in which a crisis is understood may also enable the organization to effectively respond to other problematic behaviors that have been embedded and protected within the organizational culture.

A New Agenda for Crisis Research

If crises are perceived as having the potential to be necessary correctives, then the crisis must be viewed as an integrated, rather than isolated, event. For change to take place, the event itself must be connected to the way in which the members of the institution organize their communication behaviors to reach their goals. Several studies (Bechler, 1994; Glaser, 1994; Hurst, 1995; Kurzbard & Siomkos, 1992; Mitroff, Puachant, Finney, & Pearson, 1989; Siva, 1995) illustrate this. These studies focus on various dimensions of crisis and reach distinct conclusions; but, they (in some cases unintentionally) underscore the same theme: Organizational crisis situations often grow out of the organizational culture.

In these cases, to understand and respond to crisis from a long-term perspective, the organizational members were forced to look beyond the incidents (or precipitating events) to the underlying culture (i.e., values, traditions, rituals, norms, and so forth) that guided the behaviors before, during, and after the crisis. It is important to note that successful organizations in some cases were more prone to crisis due to pushing the envelope of change (see Siva's discussion of this in his book Overdrive: Managing in Crisis-Filled Times). Consequently, in studying the corrective nature of crisis, researchers must move beyond just studying the immediate crisis response to a broader perspective that accounts for: (a) how the organizing practices and sense-making behaviors within the institution contribute to the growth and development of the exigency; and (b) how the exigency can help spark a change from dysfunctional or problematic patterns.

Granted, there is a danger in making this argument from case studies. Berg and Robb (1992) noted this danger in a scathing repudiation of using the single case study in a paradigmatic fashion when it comes to judging the effectiveness of a crisis response. However, case studies do give scholars and practitioners helpful insights into organizational activities and histories. These insights are particularly valuable when a common thread is identified from a collection of case studies and when the insights help

scholars and practitioners identify new questions that broaden crisis understanding, particularly as it relates to organizational change.

The questions that grow out of these case inquiries interrelate with the issue of how a crisis is perceived and consequently understood. When the crisis is perceived as a singular damaging event, then control, containment, and a return to the status quo becomes the expectation. When the crisis is perceived as an important and potentially beneficial corrective, change within the organization becomes an expectation. Corrections imply that something could be improved upon or that something was problematic. As systems theory demonstrates, for real change to occur the whole must be analyzed and accounted for rather than just a singular part. The result of this interrelationship between the corrective role of crisis and the organizational whole (or the overarching organizational culture and history) is a paradigmatic shift that influences how a crisis is approached, studied, and understood.

Crisis management in this paradigm does not just account for resolution of the event (a homeostatic perspective), though resolution continues to be an important dimension within the process. The focus instead is on a coordinated response that moves beyond the symptoms (i.e., often the event itself) and targets understanding how the crisis became situated within the culture, and the positive changes needed to move beyond the dysfunctional patterns that allowed for the evolution of the event (a pathological perspective).

An analogy may be helpful. When a child is taken to the emergency room for treatment of a loss of consciousness the attending physician first treats the symptoms that may threaten the life of the child, but the doctor does not stop at that point. The physician is concerned both with the symptoms (i.e., the loss of consciousness) and also how the illness came to be sustained. A history of repeated accidents and illnesses that seem to point to problems within the family system would trigger questions about dysfunctional family behaviors and lifestyles. The physician recognizes that restoring the

health of the child is of limited value when the family does not recognize or deal with the pathogenic agents that are inherent to the system which created the problem or disease in the first place. If not dealt with, these same pathogenic agents (i.e., lifestyle patterns) will continue to create problems and disease. The loss of consciousness, which instigated the parent's concern, may in fact serve an important purpose in bringing about needed changes in the family system and for the long-term health of that particular child.

In this new paradigm, crisis research questions move beyond understanding an isolated event. This is not to say that all crisis situations grow out of the organizational culture or all crisis situations are necessary correctives. That would simply not be true. A random act of violence in an organization may have few if any links to dysfunctional organizational values or behaviors. But the questions should arise: Does the organizational culture encourage, provoke, or prompt such an attack? Regardless of whether the attack seems to be random or unrelated, it cannot be divorced from the environment out of which it gains life. They are intertwined and interrelated; to understand one you have to be able to study the other.

Crisis Research: A Design Overview

The questions that grow out of this paradigm are not unlike those involved with research on disease and transportation accidents. That is, they are not answered through single case histories or isolated laboratory experiments. Answers to these questions will come from a compilation of information resulting from the use of multiple methods and ongoing organizational analysis. This is a radical change of approach in crisis research. Through categorizing and organizing these cultural elements, significant variables may be isolated and found to be common across organizational boundaries and time frames, thus providing important clues as to how and when a crisis will occur and how it can be used to stimulate needed change within the organization. Questions that seek out these common crisis variables and cultural idiosyncrasies may provide clues that allow for the introduction of a preemptive crisis to stimulate positive change and growth within the

organization (for further discussion of this idea of using a preemptive crisis to stimulate change see the discussion in chapter six of Hurst's [1995} book, Crisis and Renewal).

Previously, crisis research has been limited to studying the organization after the crisis has already occurred. However, after an exigency occurs the organization may be radically changed and the stress of the events may influence member perceptions of the organization and its past. Consequently, the first step in this research is to begin study on a sample of organizations before a crisis occurs. Mitroff et al. (1989) found crisis situations occurring on an annual basis in many large organizations. If crises are as common as these researchers suggest, several crisis situations should occur within the sample of organizations that have been under study.

The purpose of this research would be to analyze the organizational culture before, during, and after the crisis to see what variables were present at the onset, what types of changes occurred during the crisis, what stimulated lasting change within the organization, and what variables seemed to be central to the crisis process itself. This type of research will also help in understanding what forms of internal crisis communication enhance the corrective nature of the exigency and what types of behaviors impede much needed organizational changes.

The second step in this type of study would be designing a research framework that was easily overlaid on a variety of organizations. The frame (categories of study) would need to be sufficiently broad to have flexibility in studying various types of cultures, but narrow enough to establish comparable data across organizations. For instance in the cultural analysis of Olivet College following an organizational racial crisis (Bechler, 1994), the author suggested five key variables for further study in organizational life: (a) the leadership, (b) the communication networks and norms, (c) the role that the business environment plays in establishing organizational values and goals, (d) the recent history of crisis communication, (e) the legends and stories about the organization that shape public perceptions. These key variables could establish the

categories (or frame) to be used across organizations. In each category, questions would be developed on two levels: First, a grouping of fixed-alternate and open-ended questions could be used across organizations to develop a data bank of comparable variables and issues relevant to organizational life regardless of organizational type (for an example of this first level of work with these types of questions see the 1989 work on organizational cultural analysis by Mitroff et al.). Using a survey method, the researcher would gain thin, but potentially generalizable, data from a cross section of organizations.

Second, questions could be designed for specific organizations in order to gain deeper insight into the unique issues central to the organizing practices of the culture. These questions would need to be interwoven with an ethnographic methodology. The researcher would need to be immersed within the organization in order to gain insights into the language and sensemaking practices (rites, rituals, critical events, stories, legends) within the specific culture. In this way, the researcher gains insight (and thick data) into the unique nature of the organization, while also gaining information that may be useful to generalize to a broader population.

As mentioned earlier, these organizational studies would be similar to the health studies of a particular human sample over a period of years (i.e., studies of nurses from a particular school or geographical area over an extended period of time). In this way, the organizational culture is established and profiled through rich layers of data rather than the thin data accumulated through a singular study of a particular culture following a specific incident. This would address two ongoing problems: the problem of organizational access, and issues of multiple causation. When an organization is under crisis, trust becomes a critical issue and consequently, it is difficult for researchers to gain admittance to examine and explore the changes that are occurring within the culture. Organizational leaders and media are prone to provide information that assigns a singular cause for the crisis. Thus, researchers may have a distorted perspective of the crisis based on limited access. When a positive relational history is established, trust lessens as

a factor, access becomes easier because key informants have already been established prior to the crisis, and rich data gathering becomes much more likely.

These are neither short-term approaches to crisis research nor are they easily completed studies. But, this approach to research moves crisis management beyond maintaining the social and organizational status quo with no regard for the disenfranchised or for society as a whole. Because studies would be ongoing, the management of the moment would be compared across time thus providing reference points that are less likely to be influenced by the media or managerial portrayal during that particular crisis incident. Decision-making becomes “contextually” understood rather than “incidentally” understood. That is to say, the decision is viewed from the historical cultural context, rather than from the narrow frame of the particular incident in time.

These types of studies move beyond a "control, contain, and get-it-off-the-table" mentality, and offer the potential for new insights into the nature of organizational life during critical moments. The longitudinal nature of these studies should also provide key insights into what types of variables blend to help provide lasting positive (or negative) change in response to organizational crises and dysfunctional behaviors. Often, the insights gained through short-term studies of success stories are tempered by later organizational failure. Because the time of study is short, the researcher does not realize that the “wise” decisions being made, which seem to lead to bottom-line financial success and good crisis management, may in fact be the very factors that demoralize and drain the organizational culture. Consequently, at the first economic down-swing the organization may be prone to failure.

Viewing institutional communication, decision making, and change through the historical cultural lens helps ascertain what variables truly led to beneficial change and what variables provided short-term change but with disappointing long-term results. This

is a key component for this research paradigm--moving beyond looking at what brings about momentary homeostasis to looking at the pathology of organizational life.

Summary

The organizational crisis has been studied from the perspective of how to contain and control the possible damages and outcomes. Public relations practitioners and communication researchers have found various strategies that have worked with a measure of success in responding to organizational crisis situations. These strategies, however, have come with little discussion concerning the limitations of their uses. The “one-size-fits-all” approach to crisis has not considered the possibility of unethical and dysfunctional organizations surviving and maintaining patterns of behaviors that are problematic.

The organizational exigency may provide both the organization and society as a whole with a necessary corrective that creates change and innovation in dysfunctional and problematic organizational cultures. Thus, the crisis may be an important step to deconstructing problematic organizational behaviors that over time have become “acceptable” and embedded within the culture. This interrelationship between the crisis and the environment within which it develops becomes the object of study and research.

The research questions in this new paradigm are focused on understanding the longer term perspective of how the organizational culture is linked to the crises. Although immediate organizational response is important, it is not the central issue of study. This type of research agenda may answer significant questions concerning the role of specific cultural variables in the creation, and potentially the prevention, of an organizational crisis. Thus, scholars and practitioners may be able to further assist organizational members in the task of effectively communicating before, after, and in the midst of chaotic times.

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