Book Review
The Politics of Crisis Management – Public Leadership under Pressure

Arjen Boin, Paul 't Hart, Eric Stern, Bengt Sundelius
First published 2005, 16th printing 2016

Crisis is a label, a semantic construction people use to characterize situations or epochs that they somehow regard as extraordinary, volatile, and potentially far-reaching in their negative implications.

A crisis is to a considerable extent what people make of it. Initial definitions tend to be persistent.

Policy makers should therefore actively consider what a potentially crisis-triggering event means to them and their overall political strategies, and should take a proactive part in shaping the public understanding of it.

The second thing to keep in mind is that incidents and disturbances are much more likely today than ever before to be viewed not as unfortunate events that just "happen" but as the avoidable consequences of deficient political choices, government policies, and organizational practices.

Leadership in crisis response will inevitably require a two-pronged strategy: dealing with the events "on the ground" and dealing with the political upheaval and instability triggered by these events.

Policy makers cannot escape the dilemmas of crisis response by banking on crisis prevention. Crisis prevention is a necessary, indeed vital task, but it works best for familiar contingencies, such as those that have occurred previously and exhibit tell-tale signs at an early stage.

It is politically prudent to think about future crises.

Leaders should keep an open mind to the fundamental ambiguity of crises: they entail threats, but they may also harbor opportunities.

Five key tasks of crisis leadership:
1. Sense making
2. Decision making and coordinating implementation
3. Meaning making
4. Accounting and ending
5. Learning

Improving crisis sense making
Scan potential crises issues consistently for both threats and opportunities.

Policy makers should be alert to factors that inhibit the flow of vital information and limit their capacity for early, flexible, and imaginative threat assessments.

Be alert to what they are *not* told and what they might *not* get to see of the surrounding world. They should hone their intuition and develop their capacity for detecting the silences and omissions in the midst of the incoming flow of information and the talk of their advisors. Leaders must make sure that their intelligence and advisory system operates on a principle of "managed diversity": diversity of technical expertise, of values, of cultural backgrounds, in short of predispositions and perspectives in scanning and interpreting the environment for possible major contingencies.

Surprise may occur because various officials and agencies have parts of the puzzle but fail to put the pieces together in time.

Policy makers must actively create strong incentives for hitherto separated, closed, competitive segments of the bureaucracy to share and compare information.

Leadership also requires the ability to grasp and connect with the fleeting public view of what constitutes a reasonable course of action in a given crisis.

Leaders must be continuously aware of the distorting influence their presence might have on the frankness of discussion among their advisers. Sometimes the best leadership is not to provide vision and direction, indeed even not to be present, when advisers seek to ascertain threats and make sense of contingencies.

To make sense of a crisis, leaders must make sure that robust systems of data collection and information verification are in place.

Leaders are humans too: they are not immune to stressors. It takes wisdom and courage to admit as much, particularly in the midst of an ongoing crisis, but this very awareness facilitates coping.

Adhere to a pre-arranged delegation of competence and trust to deputies so that they can act with authority.

Improving crisis decision making
Crisis leadership is more than proactive crisis response; it also involves fundamental questions of institutional design.

When a crisis materializes, a leader must be able to rely on the capacity of professional units to improvise and synchronize their actions with others. Leaders should therefore invest in creating the institutional and social conditions that facilitate effective network coordination during crises.

Among the toughest decisions in crises are those that force leaders to choose between whether or not to take draconic measures.

Crisis planning helps more than crisis plans ever will in coordinating crisis response operations

There is a good reason why detailed plans tend not to work well when implemented religiously. Planning presupposes knowledge of what will happen.

A crisis, by definition, disturbs stable environments and creates uncertainty. It presents authorities with unfamiliar challenges that can never fully be dealt with in preconceived plans. Any crisis response operation will therefore necessarily contain elements of improvisation, which require flexibility and resilience rather than paper plans.

In most crises, lives are saved, and interests are protected because of alert and decisive individuals and because organizations worked together in innovative ways.

The secret lies in the planning *process:*
1. Become sensitive to problems
2. Develop an understanding
3. Facilitate smooth interactions

Well designed and implemented simulations are an elementary tool to foster realistic expectations and build mutual trust. The real secret of coordinated crisis networks is found in the shared values that guide the actions of the various actors involved.

Improving crisis meaning making
Leaders who understand that crisis management is nothing more than governance under extreme conditions will see this as an opportunity to explain the past and define possible futures.

Policy makers who seek to influence the process of meaning making in crises must tell their story to the public, the media, and the politicians in a convincing way.

Through effective communication leaders can shape perceptions that channel behavior.

Meaning making requires a philosophy of crisis management, which reminds leaders of core values that must be preserved, structural weaknesses that must be repaired, and opportunities to be explored.

Determined, dignified, and honest leadership

Improving crisis termination
Crises do not end of their own accord – they must be terminated

Crises require an open and active accountability process, one that makes it possible to release tensions, to re-equilibrate the social and political system, and to engage in meaningful learning.

Throughout the crisis, they should carefully document the crisis response as well as the process which produced it.

Leaders should not render their political fate dependent upon interpretations of the crisis put forward by their critics and other stakeholders who may not necessarily have an interest in a fair and balanced valuation of the crisis process. Leaders must battle to (re-)obtain public support.

Improving crisis learning and reform craft
The present is not a carbon copy of any past. Policy makers are easily led astray rather than helped by a strong reliance upon historical analogies with past crises.

Personal experiences of the crisis can and should be complemented by knowledge of the experiences of others. The lessons must become part of a shared and institutionalized memory bank, maintained by organizational units close enough to the heart of the policy-making machinery to be relevant, but shielded as much as possible from post-crisis politicking.

Crisis-induced learning involves proactive, interactive, and ongoing crisis-planning processes. Crisis management requires cooperative arrangements across different types of boundaries.

Chief executives should foster crisis planning as an ongoing process. They should espouse a holistic view of the requirements for crisis management performance, in contrast to narrow, sector-based, and mechanistic perspectives grounded in distinct professions. Such a shared paradigm for professional coordination can only be built in advance of the next major crisis. This leaders can do by showing personal commitment to crisis preparedness.

Leaders must free up some of their own time and allocate ample resources for joint socialization and concerted action among the organizations most likely to form the nucleus of crisis response operations. Joint training and rigorously designed and executed exercises must become institutionalized rather than incidental occurrences in the government system.

Employees are more likely to respect leaders who are willing to engage, showing their own doubts and weaknesses.

Crises are all too often the result of escalated chain reactions in policy systems or high-risk technologies. Moreover, crises are labels that do not correspond one-on-one with the performance of organizations or operators.

Hence the paradox: crisis-induced reforms are likely to produce reform-induced crises.

Successful crisis management: being effective, being moral, respecting democratic constraints – and being seen to be this way.

The above summary was compiled by Barb Graff, Director, City of Seattle's, Office of Emergency Management.