15. Managing Crises Long Term: The challenges of preparedness and response

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The Heat of Crisis

The summer of 2011–12 was dry and hot in much of Australia. Coming on the back of the continuing drought of the previous five years, it left large parts of Victoria desperate for water. The long-term outlook of the Bureau of Meteorology was that the warm weather in most of Australia would continue in future Australian summers. In the summer of 2011–12, extreme fire risks existed in most of the south and south-east of the continent. The recorded temperatures between Monday, 25 January and Tuesday, 2 February 2012 were extreme, rising to 42°C or above in and around Sydney, Canberra, Melbourne and Adelaide on most if not all days of the week.

Summer is always a busy period in Melbourne, with a number of high-level events in progress or soon to begin. Various Australia Day festivities and small events throughout the city are held, culminating in a fireworks show in the centre of the city. The Australian Open tennis championships at the Rod Laver Arena take place between 18 and 31 January and attract more than 700 000 fans overall—up to 70 000 on a popular day. The 'Big Day Out' music festival was scheduled for 26 January 2012 at Flemington Racecourse, with an expected turnout of 50 000. Most importantly, Melbourne was about to host the meeting of the G20 leaders at the end of the month, to be held at the Grand Hyatt Hotel in the central business district. Various national and international activist bodies intended to stage protests. Intelligence briefings suggested a small but hardcore group of activists planned to penetrate security perimeters and/or otherwise disrupt the summit.

On 25 January, various fires broke out in the Dandenong Ranges just east of Melbourne after a major thunderstorm that inflicted heavy lightning, but virtually no rain, passed through southern Victoria. The combination of extremely dry conditions, high temperatures and strong winds fuelled these fires. The smoke blew towards inner-city Melbourne, covering it in a thick haze. At 1 pm it appeared that various fires around the community of Healesville joined and threatened to jump containment lines on the eastern side of the

town. Community concern and media attention were intense, partly in light of the still fresh memories of the tragic events of 2009 and the harsh judgments about the State's disaster preparedness and firefighting performance delivered by the bushfire inquiry.

During the night, new fires emerged on the north-eastern outskirts of Greater Melbourne, a densely forested area. Some fires blazed out of control and moved westwards. Hundreds of people were evacuated and two dozen homes were lost. The Chief Health Officer advised the Victorian Government that the combination of extreme temperatures and the blanket of smoke covering large segments of the city constituted a major hazard to public health, particularly among the elderly and the very young. Public announcements to this effect were made. He later advised the Government to consider imposing school closures if the hot weather persisted and also mentioned the risks these conditions posed to participants in large outdoor Australia Day and other events.

During the late afternoon of 26 January reports came in from the Big Day Out about an alcohol-fuelled altercation that escalated after security personnel attempted to break up a large group of young men moving around the grounds harassing festival-goers. When a uniformed police officer became involved, he was beaten unconscious by a group, which brought in other uniformed and undercover police on duty, who allegedly responded in a heavy-handed manner as paramedics attempted to extract the injured (including the police officer, who was hospitalised). News of the incident spread fast through the plethora of graphic footage from the camera phones of festival-goers caught up in the violence, along with accusations of police brutality and rumours that the brawl was fuelled by ethnic tensions.

There was intense media coverage of the fires, which had wrecked 45 homes so far, and possibly killed a group of missing hikers. The fires were still burning in force on Melbourne's north-eastern fringe—triggering public debate about the risks associated with holding the G20 summit in Melbourne under these conditions. Furthermore, the incidents during the Big Day Out led some media outlets to question whether the police were capable of dealing with G20 protesters. On activist websites, calls for retaliation against 'police pigs' gained a lot of support. Behind the scenes, some of the advance parties of the G20 delegations sought assurances that the situation could be controlled. The head of the US Secret Service contingent was particularly adamant, and the US Ambassador conveyed his concerns discreetly to the foreign minister.

Later in the day, the first international leaders arrived in Melbourne ahead of the weekend's summit. A joint press conference involving the British, Canadian and Australian prime ministers was scheduled for 5 pm at the Grand Hyatt Hotel. In the early afternoon, the temperature had reached 44°C, stretching the

power system beyond capacity because of heat-related increased demand. Prior calls to the public to moderate consumption did not have the desired effect. At 4.31 pm the system suffered a major malfunction when a fire broke out in a substation, cutting off supply to most of the CBD and other inner-city areas. Almost immediately, hundreds of calls for emergency assistance from people trapped in elevators in extremely high temperatures clogged the switchboards of security firms and emergency services.

The blackout affected the Grand Hyatt just prior to the press conference. Backup generators did not function properly and the UK Prime Minister was trapped in a lift for 20 minutes before security could safely access the elevator shaft. Exploiting the initial confusion caused by the blackout, a small number of protesters managed to enter the security zone around the building, just as press conference attendees were ushered out of the building. The press conference was cancelled as power remained off and the temperature inside the hotel quickly rose. The media nevertheless managed to file their reports, featuring the blackout, trapped leaders, the failure of the backup generator and questions of security ahead of the major summit on the weekend at the same venue.

Traffic chaos ensued as the late-afternoon rush hour began with traffic lights not working. Emergency services reported great difficulties reaching urgent cases as a result. The power company said that given the extensive damage to the substation and the high demand for power throughout the city and the State, it did not expect to be able to fully restore power within the next 24 hours. Some limited capacity could be available by nightfall, but might cover only 25 per cent of the affected area. The Victorian Employers' Chamber of Commerce and Industry estimated the costs to businesses of the CBD blackout would run into more than A$200 million per day. It approached the Government asking to ensure that top priority be given to restoring power in that area. Likewise, the Australian Open organisers demanded power for the event to be guaranteed.

Ambulance services and hospitals reported they were in danger of being overstretched. Moreover, ambulance workers as well as police reported an increasing number of cases of heat victims in their own ranks. In parallel, medical authorities in the States of Victoria, New South Wales and South Australia affected by the heatwave reported steep increases in the number of deaths in the previous 36 hours. There were conflicting reports about the numbers involved, because it was not immediately clear how many people died on account of the heat. The reports ranged from 10 to 30 per cent increases in fatalities. The most common demographic of people who died in this period was old people—usually those living alone in residences without airconditioning.

In an impromptu statement, the Prime Minister said he had been fully briefed on the seriousness of the situation, but he nevertheless had full confidence in the

emergency services' capacity to handle the fires and the heat-related problems, as well as guarantee security for the G20. He mentioned that as a precaution, additional personnel and equipment might be flown in from interstate. He also called on citizens to look after their neighbours, to make sure vulnerable groups (the old, the very young and the infirm) were sheltered from the heat and had plenty to drink. He offered 'any and all' Commonwealth assistance to State authorities.

The next morning, news bulletins and front pages moved on from the incidents at the Grand Hyatt. They instead were full of graphic pictures of the dead being removed from derelict apartments and old people's homes in the three capital cities most affected. Talkback radio was awash with callers desperately seeking help, claiming they could not get through to the emergency services. They were mostly elderly citizens living alone or their relatives fearing the worst after not being able to reach them. Other news outlets reported 'extraordinary scenes' of panic purchasing of bottled water and soft drinks by nervous crowds at supermarkets around the capital cities. Local breakfast TV ran an interview with a disaster expert asserting that Melbourne in particular might be heading for a 'catastrophe' of historic proportions. Comparisons were drawn with Chicago's 1995 heatwave, when the city became 'an urban heat island', killing more than 750 people, and with the French and Italian heatwaves of 2003 and 2006, which were estimated to have caused more than 15 000 and 3000 deaths respectively. In each of these instances, severe criticism was directed at alleged government negligence in emergency preparedness and response.

Clearly, the signs of 'collective stress' were becoming stronger, and not just in Melbourne. There were increasingly vehement allegations on websites and local radio that critical electricity supply as well as police and emergency services resources were 'diverted away from ordinary citizens in need' to protect 'a talkfest for politicians'.

The G20 summit nevertheless unfolded without major incident, and the level of protest against it came out well below expectations. The reasons for this were grim: the heat and the fires created bigger, more acute problems to worry about. Early public estimates were that more than 1900 people across the three States died prematurely on account of the heat. Relentless live coverage of bodies being carried out of homes and offices produced a sense of shock and subsequently anger in the community. The occurrence of multiple power outages in three jurisdictions as well as the long duration of the power outage in Melbourne raised questions about the resilience of the power grid, and State and Federal governments' roles as regulators.

Thinking about Crisis Management

This scenario—a fictionalised but all too plausible combination of several real events—shows how even in otherwise prosperous, peaceful and stable communities 'business as usual' can give way to critical conditions of disaster, conflict and breakdown. When this happens, something akin to 'un-ness' reigns supreme: citizens and policymakers alike face *un*planned, *un*wanted, *un*certain and *un*pleasant prospects and choices. Crises act as pressure cookers: they arouse interests and emotions to higher levels of intensity. The more threatening, surprising and acute they appear, the stronger is the collective stress they elicit. They defy normal structures and routines of collective problem solving. They test the resilience of communities and their governments. They raise intense and awkward questions for policymakers. How could this happen? Why didn't we see this coming? Who is to blame? How do we move on from here?

We should therefore ask how governments, organisations and leaders prepare for and perform under the intense pressures generated by crises; however, we should not assume that crises are simply bad news for leaders, whose crisis management is focused purely on damage limitation, both operationally and politically. Crises may also provide leaders with unique opportunities to discard old policies and commitments, kickstart new ones, reform public organisations and reshape the political landscape by forging new coalitions. To understand the complex challenges of crisis management, we should also look very strongly at the social-psychological dimension of crises in a society. We should approach crisis management not just as an elevated form of practical problem solving, but also as a profoundly political activity with intense strategic implications for the positions of elites and institutions.

Moreover, we often think of a crisis as a sudden event, an approach that might inadvertently lead us to take a rather myopic view of just how long and dynamic a crisis might turn out to be. This is because the shocks and effects of the initial crisis will accumulate, not just in 72 hours or a week, but across a month, or two or three months. That's how crises escalate. And then the long shadow they create can last for years.

Consequently, the people who study crisis response ask, 'Although much initial focus has always been on this first stage, what happens when the proverbial shit hits the fan?' The study of this subsequent stage—how crises actually impact on institutions over a much longer period—has been relatively neglected, in planning effort and preparedness effort, and in research. I will try to cover this topic in my chapter.

What really sets a crisis apart from business as usual? There is significant consensus in the literature that from the perspective of government or the management

of organisations which must respond to these events, it is the combination of three situational characteristics that makes crises particularly tricky. First, the idea that something really bad is going on, or might happen, generates a significant level of collective stress and requires a large-scale, multidisciplinary, unconventional and possibly interjurisdictional and intersectoral response. Second, there's a sense of time pressure: policymakers feel (rightly or wrongly) that something must be done about the threat or damage right now or very soon. So this leaves them no time for conventional processes of public problem solving such as research, broad consultations, lawmaking or incremental reform paths. The third crucial component is that many aspects of the crisis are deeply uncertain, as are the possible consequences and ramifications of one's own past and present actions in relation to the events. In other words, the unknown unknowns can be a large part of the picture in a crisis.

So from a policy or managerial perspective, leaders need to take highly consequential decisions in a context in which they do not have all the numbers, they can't delegate the issue to a commission, and can't get the experts to study it for a few months. They have to act much faster than governments normally act. And often that acting involves doing quite unpleasant things, or disappointing a lot of people, or making tough decisions about the allocation of scarce resources. That's what makes crisis management tough from an operational and tactical point of view.

If, however, we also look at crises from a more strategic point of view, the picture shifts somewhat. Crises generate a form of hyper-transparency: everybody, including the entire media, is focused on the issue. There is an explosion of tension and scrutiny of what the relevant policymakers and organisations are doing during the crisis and what they have done or failed to do in the lead-up to it. The idea, then, that some things are natural disasters and the evaluation of our response to them is going to be determined by the response alone is becoming increasingly remiss. Natural disasters are almost immediately being reframed as regulatory failures one way or the other—for example, questioning why inundated houses had been built on a floodplain, or why earthquake-ravaged buildings had not been better equipped to deal with such a natural disaster. So there is an immense concentration of scrutiny of behaviour during and before the crisis; momentum builds for a move away from this discredited state of affairs to something new and better. And quite bluntly, there's a lot of pressure on people in high positions to fall on their swords one way or another. So from a more strategic political point of view, this is also a reality that people will factor into their actions.

A crucial point to remember here is that it is the *strategic* crisis after the operational and tactical one—the crisis after the crisis—that will go far to determining the long-term consequences of the disturbance, and the subsequent long-term

policy and institutional implications. It means that a trade-off is created during what is essentially the post-acute stage of a crisis: a trade-off between the need to learn (everybody pays lip-service to this idea of learning) and the strategic reality of managing the blame that is going around.

If we juxtapose operational-tactical and strategic thinking about how to respond to a crisis two logics of action emerge. The first is the logic familiar to most readers, and which is written in all official planning documents, however aspirational or fictitious they might be. Citizens are cast as victims in this kind of perspective. The media is considered part of the communication picture. They report what's going on, they can be your ally in getting messages across, and so on. Crisis management then happens on site—it happens in line agencies, in coordination centres and so on, and the key stakes are to control the physical damage and to have community resilience and rebuilding kick in as smoothly and energetically as possible.

But there is also the other logic of action in which a crisis unleashes powerful emotions—blame games, if you like—in which citizens have a voice, become advocates for positions and will form interest groups which can be vocal, well connected and influential. Such a situation can arise when the media has axes to grind, and when stories about the crises are fitted into ongoing political narratives about good guys and bad guys. Take UK prime minister Gordon Brown's handling of the Global Financial Crisis as an example. For a short while in late 2008 the British media typecast Brown, who had just taken over from Tony Blair as Labour prime minister, as the wise and heroic international statesman crafting a global solution to an unprecedented financial catastrophe. But when solutions proved elusive and painful, the media reverted back to the story frame they had already imposed on him, which was that of a no-hope prime minister, one who even had been asleep at the wheel in his long years as chancellor when the risks of bad debt were building up throughout the British financial sector.

Key crisis-management arenas are also somewhat different in this strategic perspective: they are partly the media, including the social media; they involve parliament and inquiries—in other words, the more political arenas where the action is. And obviously the key stakes are political and institutional: elite careers, programs and organisations are at a critical juncture. A crisis can be enormously consequential politically, both in terms of threats and in terms of opportunities. Think of the famous photo of Margaret Thatcher riding a tank at the time of the Falklands War, which transformed a weak prime minister into an unassailable prime minister for many years after the conflict ended. Conversely, think of Thatcher's later successor Tony Blair, whose decision to commit British armed forces to the Iraq War proved to be a significant factor in his political undoing.

Perhaps even more poignant was former US president Jimmy Carter's response to the Iran Hostage Crisis (1979–81), when 52 staff members were held hostage at the US Embassy in Tehran for 444 days. Carter met with his advisors every day for those 14 months at 7 in the morning to discuss what could be done, before any other business of government was conducted. The hostages were released the day Carter's term in office ended, and the experience was widely considered to have broken the man. If you compare photos of Jimmy Carter taken the day he took office with those taken on the day of Ronald Reagan's inauguration you see a stark contrast. There were many reasons for this, but a significant one was the emotional toll of Carter's involvement in the hostage crisis, and particularly his micromanagement of it.

All these cases demonstrate that the stakes are high. A leader can be the hero, the villain or the victim of a crisis, politically speaking. The same goes for public institutions. For example, the Roman Catholic Church has taken a big hit over recent years on account of the widespread incidence of long-term, covered-up child molestation in Catholic institutions such as foster homes. It was damning evidence of an institutional lapse of morals too big to ignore, forcing a 2000-year-old institution into public contrition, damaging compensation battles and—hopefully—critical self-examination.

Key Leadership Challenges

Up to this point I have principally been providing context. For the remainder of this chapter I will focus on what I consider to be the five key recurring challenges of responding to crises once they have emerged. My colleagues and I have identified these challenges from comparative analysis of a couple of decades of crisis responses—whether it be to disasters, terrorist events, riots or some other crisis. In so doing, we have tried to ignore the specifics of those various types of crisis scenarios and instead tried to look at the commonalities from the perspective of strategic and tactical management of these events (Boin et al. 2005, 2008).

The first challenge is *making sense of the crisis*. If uncertainty is a big part of the picture, making sense of what is actually going on—and updating that diagnosis in the face of dynamic developments—becomes a key challenge.

The second challenge is that those in management positions must *make decisions*—particularly strategic decisions—about the overall direction, nature and limits of the response.

The third one is the need to *marshal organisational capacity* both within the public sector and beyond it to address the crisis. And it is critical that this is done more quickly, and at a much larger scale, than that at which these organisations had previously operated.

The fourth challenge is what we call *meaning making*: persuading the public, other actors and the media of one's own interpretation of what is going on, what can be done, how people can increase their own safety, how we should deal with questions of accountability, and how we should deal with questions about the future.

And finally there is adaptation. This refers to the idea that we need to *move on from the crisis and look beyond it to reflect and draw lessons*. And here 'renewal' is a more appropriate term than 'rebuilding', because the term rebuilding (or even 'recovery') suggests a return to the status quo that existed before the crisis, which is a fanciful and unrealistic proposition in the face of consistent evidence that crises always act as catalysts for change at one or more levels. I will now elaborate on each of these five challenges in turn.

Sense-Making

This first challenge refers to the initial comprehension of a crisis—the moment encapsulated in the photo of George W. Bush learning of the 11 September attacks, sitting in a school with his chief of staff whispering in his ear. Of that moment Bush has said he was calculating not just what to do about 9/11, but also what kind of impression it would make on the public if the American President left a class full of schoolchildren. It was a controversial decision, but it illustrates the kind of dilemma that crisis managers face: in real time, starting to think about what is going on, what it means and what can be done about it.

In fact there are several 'sense-making' dilemmas that arise during a crisis—for example, the dilemma of speed versus accuracy. If there is a seeming imperative to act very quickly, how long are you going to wait until you get a richer picture of the situation? Are you going to take immediate action and run the risk that it is ill directed or suboptimal? But if you wait too long to respond, there is the risk the action may not be meaningful. This is a recurrent dilemma. An example of this was Jimmy Carter during the Iran Hostage Crisis. By constantly meeting with the families of the hostages, Carter lost the ability to maintain a cold, analytical picture of the situation. Though such an approach may have been a very noble thing to do, you're not the US President to be noble; you're there to be clear-headed. And if you place yourself so deeply into the emotion of a crisis it becomes very difficult to engage in that kind of dispassionate analysis.

Where do you get the expertise you need? There is a tendency for people to draw on the old hands, the experienced people, those who have been there before. This can be a very good thing; we have to respect experience and the professionalism it brings. Quite often, however, it is also beneficial to call upon people who have not traditionally been part of the crisis-management picture, or who are not known specialists in the area or part of the same old network. How do you create space in your organisational setup for bringing in and amplifying these so-called 'soft voices'? How does this tacit knowledge (which is often local knowledge) find its way to the centre of the decision-making process during a crisis?

What do we know goes wrong in sense-making? I will mention two things. One is myopia—that if the present becomes so all-consuming because buildings are collapsing and people are dying, etcetera, it is extremely hard for decision-makers to not just address pressing concerns, but also keep perspective on what's going to happen in one week, two weeks, three months, or a year. If you don't organise this long-term plan it won't happen. And even prime ministers and other senior crisis managers lapse into an operational or, at best, tactical stance and ignore the strategic stance.

I have observed this myself in various cases where I was in the command centre during a crisis. One example was on 4 October 1992 when El Al flight 1862 crashed into the Groeneveen and Klein-Kruitberg flats in the Bijlmermeer neighbourhood of Amsterdam. All the local politicians and local administrators who meant anything were put into a crisis centre where they could govern without a counsel looking over their shoulders. In these situations all the bureaucratic politics disappear because everybody is motivated to 'do the right thing'. And these people grow comfortable in this space where they are all of a sudden at the top of a pyramid. In normal life they are at best a node in a network and they have to bargain to have an impact on governance. But in a crisis you can suddenly be government, and you know best, and you're surrounded by basically your trusted and liked sources. It can be very difficult for information from outside that bunker to penetrate the reality that these people are forming with one another.

How do we improve sense-making in a crisis? There are many recommendations I could cite from the literature but I will highlight one here: the power of harnessing the wisdom of the crowd. As I previously mentioned, there is a danger of governments listening only to themselves in the context of a crisis, whereas now with social media and other forms of new technology we have a unique opportunity to gather rich pictures straight from the community level, filter it and use it.

For example, in a bushfire situation the firefighters and the people directing the firefighters usually have no idea how bad things are in affected locations. With this kind of logic transformed into a communications design, it would be possible to know a lot more in real time about what is going on if you can somehow get the individual citizen to become a co-producer of information that the crisis responders can act upon.

Sense-making should not be limited to the crisis itself, either, but should extend to institutions or aspects of your society that are brought under the microscope as a result of a crisis. Often we allow the strategic aspects of crisis management to be taken over by small politics, so it becomes more about the politics of managing tough accountability questions, saving skins, protecting paradigms and so on. But what you are then missing is the opportunity a crisis presents to learn something about your own society and about your own institutions that you didn't already know. This might cause you to rethink the design of that society and the design of that institution. It may sound lofty, but every major crisis reveals something you didn't already know. In this way, crises are potential teachers.

Take the El Al flight 1862 incident as an example. It took an airplane coming down in Amsterdam for city authorities to realise they had no idea who was actually living where in their city. Surely it would have been easy to answer some simple questions: who had died when the plane crashed? Who was living in the Groeneveen and Klein-Kruitberg flats at the time? But not in a multicultural neighbourhood like Bijlmermeer, with its high concentration of refugees, asylum-seekers and illegal aliens.

Consequently, the authorities had to go to the public and say, 'Look, we've been digging in the rubble for three days, we've found 10 bodies, there are about 100 apartments obliterated by this airplane, we don't know where you are, if you've survived this. If you happen to be illegal in this country and you are somehow victimised, please come forward.' And in doing this, they used very careful language, hinting that those victims without official papers would be allowed to stay in the country.

The next day, 1500 people showed up at City Hall. This case illustrates how a crisis can teach you about the adequacy of your registers, and about public communication; the challenge is to draw out those lessons and be open to them. Such an approach is taken by so-called high-reliability organisations (HROs). They study operators of power grids, nuclear facilities, airlines and so on, because they approach every incident as a possible teacher, and they don't rest until they find out what those lessons are. But you can only do that if you make

the learning process safe from the politics of blame. And so a strategic approach to crisis is on the one hand to deal with those accountability issues while not allowing it to be the only game in town.

Decision-Making

Consider now the challenge of decision-making. Once it has been established that there is a crisis, what next? There are some tough choices that can be made during this stage, and some potential dilemmas. Are we going to play this down, are we going to play it up? In a major case of child sex abuse in Amsterdam in 2011, the authorities had to decide whether they would limit their information to the parents of those 67 children affected, or whether they would also inform the rest of the world. They had to make a calculated guess. Obviously if you inform the rest of the world, particularly the rest of Amsterdam, you're going to create collective behaviour and collective emotions that will be very difficult to control. If you're not informing them, but you are informing 67 parents who are then going to talk to their families and friends, word is going to come out in an uncontrolled fashion and you may look like you've been trying to suppress information. The authorities in Amsterdam quickly realised they could not contain information regarding this case, so they acted on the presumption it would be a big deal, and prepared a large response accordingly.

The role of insurance companies can also present a dilemma for decision-makers. What, for example, if the insurance industry doesn't do its bit—or what government and citizens consider to be its bit—in assisting victims of crisis? Is government going to step in? This would be costly, and would set a precedent for the next crisis. So how do public policymakers decide whether or not to act? And how do professional public servants make sure that during the initial shock following the outbreak of crisis, their political executives don't go running around making heartfelt promises that the experts know cannot be kept later?

Such a situation arose on 28 September 1994 when the ferry *MS Estonia* sank in the Baltic Sea, with the loss of 852 lives. Most of the dead were Swedish nationals, and immediately following the tragedy the acting prime minister of Sweden, Carl Bildt, promised the next of kin they would get their relatives' bodies back. A few hours after Bildt made this commitment, however, his navy told him this would be extremely difficult to do. It is this kind of impulse generosity that crisis managers might have to think twice about, even at the risk of seeming callous and indifferent.

What can go wrong in terms of making those decisions? I have already covered quite a few, but I haven't mentioned lack of disagreement. Group-think can be a real issue, especially in a bunker situation where policymakers and their

advisers face something very unpleasant and the world out there has no idea what pressures are on them. Outside advice does not necessarily come through to the 'inner circle' handling the crisis. It's a physical and an emotional setting that is conducive to tunnel vision and group solidarity. And it shows: we know from comparative research that more crises are mismanaged because of excessive consensus at the top than because of a lack of consensus there (Janis 1989; Schafer and Crichlow 2010).

A lot of the lack of consensus occurs below the top; agencies fighting each other can be a problem all on their own—something I will discuss later. But at the top it is more often this consensus, or assumed consensus, that isn't questioned under the pressure of the circumstances and the stress of the situation that leads to mismanagement.

What, then, are sensible things to do to improve crisis decision-making capacity? Those in crisis-management positions must think hard about the balance between their ambition and their generosity: the positioning of the government as the purveyor of solutions and the purveyor of around-the-clock care for everybody versus a restrained policy posture that emphasises self-reliance and that limits the government's liability and involvement in the crisis. Clear limits of involvement must be set because it is better to do that quickly, clearly and consistently rather than at a later stage when expectations may have already been raised.

Another way to improve decision-making is the realisation—and there is consensus about this among researchers—that you cannot aspire to control tactics and operations from the centre, whatever that centre might be. You need to have a far-reaching form of delegation and mandate to empower localised units to respond as they believe is best. Moreover, you have to rely on their professionalism, which is easy to do if you have invested in pre-crisis training and communication. But whenever we see a large and dynamic crisis being micromanaged by the centre of the centre, paralysis, misjudgments and a lack of tailor-made solutions ensue.

Organising Response

Consider the US response to Hurricane Katrina in 2005 as an example of how not to organise a response. It is a story of complete breakdown of intergovernmental relations, from the local to the State to the federal level. It's the classic case of how not to coordinate a major disaster response.

What, then, is the right way to organise a response? Is it best to coordinate by writing plans and, when the disaster strikes, applying the plan and seeing if it works? Or is it better to rely on improvisation because the situation calls for a

move beyond the plans? This second option is facilitated by having relationships cemented by pre-crisis planning and processes of exercise and joint operations. How much centralisation is necessary? What should be centralised and what done locally? Is coordination about coordinating the machinery of government or about coordinating the collective effort of the affected society? Of course it should be the latter.

Why, then, is it that most of the coordination processes that my colleagues and I study tend to be of a myopic, government-centric nature, which fail to harness the resources of NGOs or the private sector? One only need consider Hurricane Katrina, where some of the major corporations, particularly supermarkets, had an impeccable logistical operation and were able to provide more direct care to the community than were the entire government operations. And yet they were never part of the official crisis response. This was a great shame and it shouldn't happen, but it happens all the time.

And finally, how much of our organising energy do we concentrate on that immediate acute response phase and how much on planning ahead to the recovery phase? My rule of thumb is that 80 per cent of the time the energy is focused on the response phase. Recovery is always the stepchild of a lot of the pre-crisis planning and coordination efforts. And yet, the recovery phase is the one that will ultimately stick in people's minds. After all, any heroism of the response phase will be quickly forgotten if you're still waiting for shelter five months after the crisis occurred.

What traps should be avoided? One is that if people involved in the crisis management meet only in a crisis setting trust doesn't immediately build up among strangers. Trust builds on familiarity with who the person is, what their organisation represents, what they can do, what their operational logic is, and so forth. I cannot emphasise enough the importance of bringing about that familiarity by organising preliminary crisis-response exercises. This needs to an ongoing, very broadly organised process so that the people who will be thrown together to manage a crisis are on familiar terms long before the crisis. And it needs to be done every one or two years.

Finally, if you tolerate turf wars the way they were tolerated in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, you are setting yourself up for nastiness. And so, despite everything I have argued in favour of a decentralised response, somewhere in the centre of the centre managers should still be observing the quality of interaction that's going on. And if they see infighting taking over, there needs to be a short, sharp and unmistakable intervention to stop it.

Meaning-Making

The fourth key challenge to crisis management I will highlight is meaning-making. How do you regulate public distress? The 2011 Fukushima nuclear disaster was an interesting case from a meaning-making perspective. The world did not get to see the Japanese Prime Minister for the first eight days of the crisis. The public face of the Government's meaning-making effort was a cabinet secretary. The man was competent, but the public nevertheless began to wonder why their leader was so eerily absent from the story (though he was frantically active behind the scenes to the point of attempting to micromanage not just the governmental response but also that of the private energy provider Tepco which operated the Fukushima plant).

The example raises interesting questions about the choices governments make about who will be the public face of the crisis. Usually the head of the government is assigned this role—which may or may not be a good idea. In Queensland, Premier Anna Bligh's political capital was very low at the time of the 2011 floods; but she managed to do the meaning-making so well that suddenly she experienced a political comeback, if only briefly. I suspect there were some personality and stylistic issues involved in the decision to keep the Japanese Prime Minister in the background immediately following Fukushima. But there may also have been a strategic calculus at play. Prime Minister Kan's political stock was low at the time and plenty of bad news had to be delivered; perhaps the Government thought it should hold the prime minister in reserve for when there was some good news to tell. The problem with Fukushima was there was never any good news. And after a few days people started to wonder who was actually leading the country.

The Japanese Prime Minister was not the first national leader not to communicate publicly to citizens that something bad had occurred. It took Mikhail Gorbachev seven days to acknowledge the Chernobyl nuclear meltdown incident; Vladimir Putin arrived at the site of the *Kursk* submarine disaster nearly a week after it had occurred. Even in the limited democracy setting of Putin's Russia, not showing up—he had to be dragged to the *Kursk* scene—was a public relations fiasco. It's not just about what you say; it's also about where you say it, when you say it and with whom you engage. They are all part of the meaning-making process.

One must also be wary of letting the experts do all the talking. At the time of the Chernobyl incident, we had a radiation expert on Dutch television reassuring the public that radiation levels were only 10 000 times higher than normal. This may have been reassuring in his mind, but not necessarily in the mind of the public. But he couldn't conceive of that because he's not a member of the public—he's an expert.

Another difficult issue surrounding meaning-making is what we in the industry call the 'creeping crisis'—whether it be some form of slow environmental degradation, a possible pandemic about to emerge or another slowly unfolding crisis. I occasionally attend the lectures of Dutch epidemiologist Hans Lusthaus, who never fails to scare me by pointing out that at any one time five or six potentially lethal pandemics are bubbling away under the surface. How can meaning-making be done in such scenarios? You don't want to run the risk of succumbing to 'cry wolf syndrome': going out with all guns blazing, alerting people to the enormous danger they're in, only to have the supposed danger not materialise quickly, which destroys your credibility.

Consequently, building up a solid evidence base is a critical part of the sense-making process. This enables you to convince the public that although they may not be able to see buildings burning or people dying right now, there is a high probability that they will be able to in a certain amount of time. If you don't have that evidence base, shut up.

If you do have that evidence base, what is the strategy to persuade governments, corporations or whoever is in charge that something is 'rotten in Denmark'? Is it best to use really powerful hyperbole and perhaps even go public so as to surround those potentially affected by the crisis with information? Or is it better to inch them slowly towards awareness that there's a big problem going on?

I will always remember Peter Shergold, then the secretary of the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet and head of the Australian Public Service, describing to one of my student audiences the way in which he incrementally persuaded John Howard that he should do something about climate change in the latter years of his prime ministership—a challenge, given that the former prime minister was at best not interested in climate change, at worst a climate change denier. The approach Shergold took was to casually slip little bits of information that pertained to climate change into his daily meetings with Howard. 'Oh, Prime Minister, have you noticed that the CEO of this mining corporation is now saying we should do something about climate change?' Slowly Howard got annoyed, but he could also not deny what was going on; he eventually agreed to create a taskforce to look into the issue, with Shergold as its chair. This was a sensible strategy, and perhaps in retrospect a more sensible strategy than Al Gore going to Hollywood and scaring us in 2007 with *An Inconvenient Truth*.

Meaning-making presents some dilemmas. Do you project certainties or do you also project your uncertainty? If you have unknown unknowns, do you tell the public you have them? And again, a lot of the research suggests that governments err on the side of not informing the public about things they don't know to prevent the public from panicking. The problem with this argument is that there is no academic evidence to suggest the public panics. In fact,

the evidence suggests the contrary: the public does not panic. It's a form of governmental, paternalistic bias that the public can't handle bad news. It's a real source of concern.

How, then, do we improve our meaning-making capacity? These days it's crucial that you have not just the resources but also the skills to sustain real-time multimedia communication for a very long time. Many governments are making good progress in this area because in a way it isn't difficult to acquire the relevant hardware, media people and so on. Yet I don't want to play this down: it's a necessary but not sufficient component of a resilient meaning-making capacity.

It is also important to have people involved in the meaning-making effort who have an understanding of human behaviour in extreme situations—people who understand the social-psychological perspective and not just the economic or physical infrastructure perspectives. Quite often people with this experience are not harnessed to the task, with politicians instead devising their public communications strategy on the basis of the advice of either politically focused media advisors or economists—both groups liable to making stupid and crude assumptions about human behaviour. I could cite many examples of ill-conceived public communication because the socio-psychological expertise is not around the table.

A final point to make about meaning-making is that it is not a one-sided show that the government can run. Other actors in the political context of crisis management are engaging in their own meaning-making. My colleagues and I use the term 'framing contest' as a way of describing what happens as we move from the acute stage towards investigations. It becomes a contest between different frames of interpreting what went on, why it went on, who is to blame and what we can learn from it. So as part of that contest, you have to really work on your credibility; you have to be careful not to say or do anything that undermines your credibility even further than it will have been undermined by the sheer fact that the crisis has happened on your watch.

Adaptation

Only weeks after Hurricane Katrina had destroyed coastal areas of Louisiana and Mississippi, Hurricane Rita entered the Gulf of Mexico. When the projected trajectory of Rita included Houston (the fourth-largest city in the United States), the Texas authorities quickly ordered an evacuation. The lessons of Katrina had been learned! In the chaotic evacuation, more than 100 people died. Hurricane Rita changed course and never reached Houston.

The extent to which lessons are learned after a crisis (if they are learned at all) is one of the most under-researched aspects of crisis management (Birkland 2006). A crisis or disaster holds huge potential for lessons to be learned about reforming contingency planning and training to enhance resilience in the event of similar episodes in the future. In an ideal world, we might expect all relevant players to study these lessons carefully and apply them in order to reform organisational practices, policies and laws. In reality, there are many barriers to lesson drawing.

Organisations tend not to be good learners, certainly not in the aftermath of crises and disasters. One crucial barrier is the lack of authoritative and widely accepted explanations of the causes of the crisis or disaster. Potential factors encompass individual, organisational, technological and societal shortcomings, all of which can be subject to many different interpretations and assumptions about their significance. Yet even if explanations could attract common agreement, many organisational factors such as an excessive focus on core goals at the expense of 'looking for trouble' can act as barriers to preventing future crises and improving coping capacities in the event that they do occur. Most public service organisations are focused strongly on delivering front-line public services, rather than on scenario planning and crisis training. Worst-case thinking is rarely high on agendas.

In addition to cognitive and institutional influences on learning lessons after a crisis, the political and social aspects can also be crucial. A dominant political depiction of a crisis as the product of failures of prevention or lack of foresight in contingency planning can set the agenda for rethinking policies, processes and organisational rules. Other players in the lesson-drawing game, however, might attempt to use the political reform rhetoric to advocate very different types of reforms from those put forward by leaders. Therefore, the stakes are high for leaders in their capacities to steer lesson-drawing processes. The key challenge is to ensure that in the wake of a crisis, they have a dominant influence on the feedback stream and that existing policy networks and public organisations follow the leader's desired pathway.

Despite complex barriers to post-crisis learning, crises also present opportunities. They can create windows of opportunity for policy reform, institutional overhaul and even leadership revival (Boin et al. 2008, 2009). The 2001 foot-and-mouth disease crisis in the United Kingdom led to the abolition of an insular and backward-looking agricultural department. Barack Obama's victory in the 2008 US presidential elections was helped by a perception that he was better placed than his rival John McCain to lead the country's economic revival. A word of caution is necessary here. Leaders need to be careful of 'knee-jerk' reactions that are high on symbolic value because they create the impression of swift and decisive reform action, but are not based on considered deliberation or sound

rationale. Sweeping reforms and the rapid replacement of key officials in response to a crisis or a critical inquiry report may help create the impression that a leader is 'in charge'; however, such action may severely limit the capacity for genuine lesson drawing, and may create new vulnerabilities or reinforce old ones.

Table 15.1 Components of Crisis-Response Capacity

A. Sense-making capacity

  1. Absorbing surprise, shock and uncertainty

  2. Exploiting experience without being captured by it

  3. Mobilising and utilising comprehensive expertise

  4. High-velocity and continuous monitoring and updating

  5. Safeguarding the long-term view

B. Steering and synthesising capacity

  1. Delivering strategic direction

  2. Empowering operational agility

  3. Forging concerted action across jurisdictions and professions

  4. Safeguarding consideration of values and ethics

C. Meaning-making capacity

  1. High-speed, all-channel public communication

  2. Acknowledging and channelling public emotions

  3. Mobilising pro-social community behaviour

  4. Maintaining authority in the face of criticism

D. Consolidation capacity

  1. Proactive recovery planning

  2. Balancing solidarity and restraint in service provision

  3. Resilient response–recovery transitions

E. Adaptive capacity

  1. Proactive management of external accountability demands

  2. Safeguarding institutional self-reflection

  3. Exploring and exploiting learning opportunities

  4. Fostering collective memory and a culture of awareness

Source: Author's summary.

Three Paths to Improving Crisis Management

In this chapter I have listed a broad catalogue of factors that together constitute what one might call the strategic capacity of a crisis-response system (see Table 15.1). Trying to put this into practice involves a broad and long-term capacity-building agenda, but let me highlight the three most important factors. First, it is important *to open up crisis-management planning*. By this I mean taking it away from the monopoly of experts, operational agencies and specialists. Obviously they are pivotal in a crisis situation, but if we are to take community resilience

seriously, surely the community—in whatever form—should be part of the planning process rather than being relied on only when government meets its own limitations.

Second, it is imperative to *focus on the crisis after the crisis*—the so-called recovery phase. This requires focusing on the adaptation process of learning the right lessons rather than becoming obsessed with fighting the last war—something the average inquiry report is often overly concerned with. Because while it is important to be prepared for the last war, it is even more important to be prepared for a whole range of possible wars you have to fight in the future.

My final recommendation is to *upgrade the capacity to learn from a crisis* rather than simply engage in the blame game. This requires embracing the best practices available (which are extremely well documented) from so-called high-reliability organisations (Weick and Sutcliffe 2007). Doing these things will go a long way towards creating a culture of learning in an organisation that routinely has to make extremely dangerous decisions in the context of a crisis.

There is evidence to suggest that crisis-response capacity will become even more important in the future as the nature of crises changes. Two rather sweeping developments demand our attention. First, crises are becoming increasingly interconnected and trans-boundary in nature (Boin and Rhinard 2008; Helsloot et al. 2012). Contemporary crises such as pandemics and mega computer viruses transgress functional, geographical and time boundaries that used to keep crises and disasters more or less contained. We are facing crises that escalate across policy domains and countries, combining long incubation times with long-term effects. Such crises are harder to manage through conventional means and strategies.

Second, the political-administrative capacity to deal with such crises has been gradually eroding. The current downsizing of the state, the inheritance of two or more decades of New Public Management insistence on leanness and efficiency, and the fragmentation of the political consensus about 'bottom-line' issues of safety and security—are all phenomena that can be easily exaggerated, but it is hard to see how they contribute to the type of political-administrative capacity required for dealing prudently with the crises of the era.

Many things may change, but one thing that will remain the same is the call for leadership that follows the onset of a crisis. It is time that crisis management is viewed as an integral and crucial dimension of leadership, in both the public and the private sectors.

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