

## CHAPTER 3

# The Crisis Approach

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The terms “crisis” and “disaster” are often used synonymously. In academic discourse, however, these concepts refer to different situations that prompt different questions with answers that require different theories. At the same time, the concepts are clearly related. Both deal with events that belong in the “un-ness” category: unexpected, undesirable, unimaginable, and often unmanageable situations (Hewitt, 1983).

We speak of crisis when a community of people—an organization, a town, or a nation—perceives an urgent threat to core values or life-sustaining functions, which must be dealt with under conditions of uncertainty (Rosenthal, Boin, & Comfort, 2001). A crisis may thus result from a wide variety of threats; think of the Cuban Missile Crisis, Chernobyl, SARS, 9/11, Y2K, and the Asian tsunami. Many forms of potential tragedy can become crises.

A disaster is typically, but not universally, defined in terms of an episode that is collectively construed as very harmful (Perry & Quarantelli, 2005). The agents of destruction may vary, but in most traditional definitions they fall within the category of natural forces (Stallings, 2005). A list of disasters typically includes floods, hurricanes, tsunamis, and earthquakes that have caused major personal and infrastructural damage. In the past, disaster researchers have paid less attention to other types of catastrophes such as terrorism, hostage-takings, ethnic conflicts, and financial and technological breakdowns.

With a slight conceptual jog of the imagination, we can relate both concepts: a disaster, then, is viewed as a crisis with a devastating ending (Boin, 2005). Not every crisis turns into a disaster: In 1962, the Cuban Missile Crisis brought the world on the brink of nuclear war, but the American and Soviet leaders were able to stave off disaster. Every disaster does fit the crisis definition (e.g., the multiple crises caused by Hurricane Katrina in the late summer of 2005).

A crisis approach complements the disaster approach in several ways. First, it seeks to answer a set of questions that are of immediate interest to those who study disaster. By studying crisis, we learn something about the origins and development of disaster. Second, the crisis approach takes a broader view at types of “un-ness.” This fits with recent developments in the disaster field that seek to study all sorts of disastrous events (not just the natural disasters). Third, the crisis approach trains our attention on the opportunity dimension of adversity: What is a crisis to some may be an opportunity to others (see also Cuny, 1983).

The purpose of this chapter is to demonstrate the complementary nature of the crisis approach. We build the chapter around two sets of questions that seem equally relevant to

crisis and disaster researchers. The first set addresses the nature of crisis, inquiring into the causes, characteristics, and consequences of crises. The second set addresses the effectiveness of crisis management. Familiar questions—asked about nearly every crisis—include: Why do so many crises arrive as a thief in the night (even though most crises seem to provide warning signals that are particularly recognizable in hindsight)? Why do crisis managers make what appear to be avoidable mistakes? Why are some lessons learned and why are other lessons learned but ignored?

We start the chapter off with a brief introduction to the crisis concept, the key questions, and the various approaches (theoretical pillars) used to answer those questions. We next address the causes of crises, followed by a discussion of how policymakers deal with the dynamics of breakdown. The chapter concludes with an assessment of the crisis approach, considering both the academic and practitioner points of view.

## THE NATURE OF CRISIS

In both Chinese and Greek, the term crisis refers to a critical point, a fork in the road of development: the word “crisis” implies threat, but also opportunity. In medical thinking, a crisis refers to the critical phase of a patient’s fight with a deadly threat: will he or she live or die? In its contemporary usage, crisis still combines the grave threat and the escape door: the situation may look bad, but it is not hopeless (this fundamental ambiguity stands in marked contrast to the doom implied by the meaning of the Greek word for “disaster”).

We speak of crisis when policymakers experience “a serious threat to the basic structures or the fundamental values and norms of a system, which under time pressure and highly uncertain circumstances necessitates making vital decisions” (Rosenthal, Charles, & ‘t Hart, 1989, p. 10).

This definition of crisis covers a wide variety of adversity: natural disasters and environmental threats, financial meltdowns and surprise attacks, terrorist attacks and hostage takings, epidemics and exploding factories, infrastructural dramas and organizational decline. What all these dramatic events have in common is that they create impossible conditions for those who seek to manage the response operation and have to make urgent decisions while essential information about causes and consequences remains unavailable. Let us consider the three key components—threat, uncertainty, and urgency—of the crisis definition in somewhat more detail.

Crises occur when core values or life-sustaining systems of a community come under *threat*. Think of widely shared values such as safety and security, welfare and health, integrity and fairness, which become shaky or even meaningless as a result of (looming) violence, destruction, damage or other forms of adversity. The more lives are governed by the value(s) under threat, the deeper the crisis goes. That explains why a looming natural disaster (floods, earthquakes, hurricanes, extreme heat or cold) usually evokes a deep sense of crisis: the threat of death, damage, destruction, or bodily mutilation clearly violates the deeply embedded values of safety and security for oneself and one’s loved ones (Raphael, 1986, p. 26).

Mass destruction is, of course, but one threat that can trigger a crisis. The downfall of a large corporation may touch off a crisis in a society if it threatens the job security of many and undermines the trust in the economic system. In public organizations, a routine incident can trigger a crisis when media and elected leaders frame the incident as an indication of inherent flaws and threaten to withdraw their support for the organization. The Anthrax scare and the

Washington Beltway snipers caused the death of relatively few people in the fall of 2001, but these crises caused widespread fear among the public, which—in the immediate aftermath of the 9/11 events—was enough to virtually paralyze parts of the United States for weeks. In other words, a crisis does not automatically entail victims or damages.

Crises induce a sense of *urgency*. Serious threats that do not pose immediate problems—think of climate change or future pension deficits—do not induce a widespread sense of crisis. Some experts may be worried (and rightly so), but most policymakers do not lose sleep over problems with a horizon that exceeds their political life expectancy. Time compression is a defining element of crisis: the threat is here, it is real, and it must be dealt with as soon as possible. At least that is the way it is being articulated and perceived in the public domain.

In a crisis, the perception of threat is accompanied by a high degree of *uncertainty*. This uncertainty pertains both to the nature and the potential consequences of the threat: What is happening and how did it happen? What's next? How bad will it be? More importantly, uncertainty clouds the search for solutions: What can we do? What happens if we select this option? What will others do?

Crisis is the product of shared perception—and it is not always clear when people agree that an urgent threat exists and combines with a high degree of uncertainty. In fact, the very definition of crisis tends to become subject of discussion (we will return to this point shortly).

We can organize the field of crisis research around two core questions: What causes a crisis? And why do people perceive some situations as a crisis whereas they ignore other seemingly similar situations? The second question pertains to crisis management: What determines the effectiveness of crisis management efforts? The crisis field applies a variety of theoretical perspectives to answer these questions.

## THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

The crisis field is best described as an amalgam of niche perspectives drawn from all social sciences. This provides for a rich and fruitful mix of perspectives— exactly what is needed to understand the complexities and dynamics of crises and crisis management. Let us review how crisis researchers have cherry picked from the various theoretical fields in the search for answers to the research questions formulated in the preceding section.

The crisis approach shares with the disaster perspective a deep relationship with sociology. In sociological terms, crisis marks the phase during which order-inducing institutions stop to function—the threat of anomy lurks in the background. It is the moment—to cite Everett Hughes (1946)—when “the cake of custom is broken.” Sociologists also saw an optimistic lining in the crisis cloud, noting that during a crisis “the attention is aroused and explores the situation with a view to reconstructing modes of activity” (W. I. Thomas, cited in Hughes, 1946). The crisis concept has remained a staple in sociological thinking, but a crisis perspective never occupied its own niche in sociology (a niche that is arguably occupied by its disaster cousins).

Interestingly enough, another subfield of sociology—organization theory— produced one of the most powerful theories informing our crisis perspective. In *Normal Accidents*, Charles Perrow (1984/1999) applied two wholesale sociological concepts (complexity and coupling) to explain organizational breakdown (we will elaborate on Perrow's theory in the next section). This and other similar work in organization theory helped raise a fundamental debate about

the feasibility and desirability of entrusting dangerous technology to large-scale bureaucracies (Chiles, 2001; Sagan, 1993).

In their studies of group decision making, social psychologists have created an impressive body of work that has become a pillar of the crisis approach. Through their work, we have learned much about individual decision making under stress (Holsti, 1979; Janis & Mann, 1977). Moreover, social psychologists have shown that group decisions do not necessarily compensate for the shortcomings of the stressed individual's decision-making process (Hart, 1994; Janis, 1982; 't Hart, Stern, & Sundelius, 1997). These findings suggest that critical decisions merit close attention. The crisis approach accords much importance to crisis decision making, without losing sight of the institutional context in which governmental decision making takes place (Stern & Sundelius, 2002).

In addition, psychologists have done important work that helps us understand the relation between human error, technology, organizational culture, and the development of crisis (Reason, 1990). This field of safety research has developed a complementary perspective on critical decisions, which is known as natural decision making (Flin, 1996; Klein, 2001). Their research shows that well-trained operators make crisis decisions in a very particular way: they compare their situational assessment with mental slides of similar situations (they select the decision that comes with the slide that matches their assessment). It tells us that crisis decision making differs quite dramatically from the incremental, semirationalistic way in which routine decisions tend to be made.

A decisional perspective also informs the study of international crises, which takes place in the field of International Relations (IR). Crisis scholars—a small minority in this huge subfield of political science—tend to analyze international conflicts in terms of high-level decision making (Hermann, 1972; Janis, Herek, & Huth, 1987) as well as dynamic interaction between parties (Brecher, 1993). In explaining the escalation and outcomes of international conflicts, they study how pervasive perceptions, bureau politics, and small-group dynamics affect the critical decisions made during a crisis (Allison, 1971; George, 1991; Jervis, 1976; Lebow, 1981). This firm body of richly documented studies has taught us much about leadership behavior in times of crisis.

In political science, on the other hand, crisis has predominantly been studied in more structural–functionalistic terms. In studies of political development, a crisis refers to a necessary phase of disorder in a nation's march toward democracy (see Almond, Flanagan, & Mundt, 1973; Linz & Stepan, 1978; Zimmerman, 1983). The sociological meaning of the term was thus preserved, as political scientists applied it to describe a phase in which established institutions had lost their influence. But the term was infused with a normative meaning, which has made the study of crisis slightly suspect in this field ever since. When political scientists refer to crisis, the automatic question is: Whose crisis are we talking about? In more recent years, this question has led to intriguing contributions that stress the subjective nature of crisis and its outcomes.

Business scholars have produced a substantial body of usually rather prescriptive work to prepare managers and MBA students to deal with reputation damage, shifting markets, frauds, and other adverse events that threaten the profitability of the firm (Mitroff & Pauchant, 1990; Pauchant & Mitroff, 1992). The rising number of books and articles on the topic of business continuity suggests the emergence of a crisis field in its own right. Wherever it is heading, the business field has already produced many interesting case studies, which have helped crisis researchers understand the importance of regulatory environments (or the lack thereof).

In yet another niche—enfolded in the field of communications studies—interesting work is being done on the relationship between crisis actors, (political) stakeholders, media, and civilians (Fearn-Banks, 1996; Seeger, Sellmer, & Ulmer, 2003). This body of research helps us understand why sound decisions may or may not help to manage a crisis, depending on the way they are communicated. It helps us understand how media frames shape crisis reports, which, in turn, affect general perceptions of the crisis and the authorities managing it.

Our *tour d'horizon* would not be complete without mentioning the risk field, itself an interdisciplinary social–scientific venture (Pidgeon, Kasperson, & Slovic, 2003). It studies why and how people act on negligible risks (avoiding flying) while they ignore others (smoking, driving without seatbelts). The steadfast stream in this field tries to calculate risks, which should help policymakers make thorough decisions on baffling issues such as genetically modified food, environmental pollution, or space travel.

The last pillar of thought mentioned here is, of course, the field of disaster research. The crisis approach outlined in this chapter leans heavily on both the empirical and theoretical findings of disaster research. The thorough understanding of collective behavior, disaster myths, and the pathologies of top-down coordination in times of adversity have proved particularly fruitful to understanding crisis dynamics (see the other chapters of this book for the lessons of disaster research).

These perspectives have helped us to better understand the nature of crisis and the dynamics of crisis management. In the next two sections, we present the key insights generated in the crisis field with regard to key questions formulated earlier.

## THE UBIQUITY OF CRISIS

Crises were once explained in terms of bad luck or God's punishment, but this view has become obsolete (Bovens & 't Hart, 1996; Quarantelli, 1998; Steinberg, 2000). Crises are the result of multiple causes, which interact over time to produce a threat with devastating potential.

This may be somewhat counterintuitive, as it defies the traditional logic of “triggers” and underlying causes. Linear thinking (“big events must have big causes”) thus gives way to a more subtle perspective that emphasizes the unintended consequences of increased complexity (Buchanan, 2000). The approach does not seek to identify specific factors that “cause” a crisis. It proposes that *escalatory processes undermine a social system's capacity to cope with disturbances*. The agents of disturbance may come from anywhere—ranging from earthquakes to human errors—but the ultimate cause of the crisis lies in the inability of a system to deal with the disturbance.

The causes of vulnerability often reside deep within the system. They typically remain unnoticed, or key policymakers fail to attend to them (Turner, 1978). In the process leading up to a crisis, these seemingly innocent factors combine and transform into disruptive forces that come to represent an undeniable threat to the system. These factors are sometimes referred to as pathogens, as they are present long before the crisis becomes manifest (Reason, 1990).

The notion that crises are an unwanted by-product of complex systems has been popularized by Charles Perrow's (1999) analysis of the nuclear power incident at Three Miles Island. Perrow describes how a relatively minor glitch in the plant was misunderstood in the control room. The plant operators initially thought they understood the problem and applied the required technical response. But as they had actually misinterpreted the warning signal, the response worsened the problem. The increased threat mystified the operators (they could not understand why the problem persisted) and invited an urgent response. By again applying

the “right” response to the wrong problem, the operators continued to exacerbate the problem. Finally, someone figured out the correct source of the problem, just in time to stave off a disaster.

The very qualities of complex systems that drive progress lie at the heart of most if not all technological crises. As sociotechnical systems become more complex and increasingly connected (tightly coupled) to other (sub)systems, their vulnerability for disturbances increases (Perrow, 1999; Turner, 1978). The more complex a system becomes, the harder it is for anyone to understand it in its entirety. Tight coupling between a system’s component parts and with those of other systems allows for the rapid proliferation of interactions (and errors) throughout the system.

Complexity and lengthy chains of accident causation do not remain confined to the world of high-risk technology. Consider the world of global finance and the financial crises that have rattled it in recent years (Eichengreen, 2002). Globalization and ICT have tightly connected most world markets and financial systems. As a result, a minor problem in a seemingly isolated market can trigger a financial meltdown in markets on the other side of the globe. Structural vulnerabilities in relatively weak economies such as Russia, Argentina, or Turkey may suddenly “explode” on Wall Street and cause worldwide economic decline.

The same characteristics can be found in crises that beset low-tech environments such as prisons or sports stadiums. Urban riots, prison disturbances, and sports crowd disasters always seem to start off with relatively minor incidents (Waddington, 1992, refers to flashpoints). On closer inspection, however, it becomes clear that it is a similar mix of interrelated causes that produces major outbursts of this kind.

In the case of prison disturbances, the interaction between guards and inmates is of particular relevance (Boin & Rattray, 2004). Consider the 1990 riot that all but destroyed the Strangeways prison in Manchester (United Kingdom). In the incubation period leading up to the riot, prison guards had to adapt their way of working in the face of budgetary pressure. Inmates did not understand or appreciate this change in staff behavior and subsequently began to challenge staff authority, which, in turn, generated anxiety and stress among staff. As staff began to act in an increasingly defensive and inconsistent manner, prisoners became even more frustrated with staff behavior. A reiterative, self-reinforcing pattern of changing behavior and staff–prisoner conflict set the stage for a riot. A small incident started the riot, which, in turn, touched off a string of disturbances in other prisons. Many civil disturbances between protestors and police seem to unfold according to the same pattern (Goldstone & Useem, 1999; Smelser, 1962; Waddington, 1992).

All this makes a crisis hard to detect. As complex systems cannot be simply understood, it is hard to qualify the manifold activities and processes that take place in these systems. Growing vulnerabilities go unrecognized and ineffective attempts to deal with seemingly minor disturbances continue. The system thus “fuels” the lurking crisis. Only a minor “trigger” is needed to initiate a destructive cycle of escalation, which may then rapidly spread throughout the system. Crises may have their roots far away (in a geographical sense) but rapidly snowball through the global networks, jumping from one system to another, gathering destructive potential along the way.

An intriguing question asks whether modern systems have become increasingly vulnerable to breakdown. One might argue that modern society is better than ever equipped to deal with routine failures: great hospitals, computers and telephones, fire trucks and universities, regulation and funds—these factors have helped to minimize the scope and number of crises that were once routine (Wildavsky, 1988). Others argue that the resilience of modern society has deteriorated: when a threat does materialize (say an electrical power outage), the most modern systems suffer most. Students of natural disasters make a similar point: modern

society increases its vulnerability to disaster by building in places where history warns not to build. The costs of natural and man-made disasters continue to grow, while scenarios of future crises promise more mayhem (see the chapter by Quarantelli, Lagadec, & Boin in this handbook).<sup>1</sup>

Before anything can be done to prevent crisis scenarios from materializing, emerging threats must be explicitly recognized as crises. There are at least three reasons why many potential crises fail to gain such recognition.

First, threats to shared values or life-sustaining functions simply cannot always be recognized before their disastrous consequences materialize. As the crisis process begins to unfold, policymakers often do not see anything out of the ordinary. Everything is still in place, even though hidden interactions eat away at the pillars of the system. It is only when the crisis is in full swing and becomes manifest that policymakers can recognize it for what it is.

The second reason is found in the contested nature of crisis. A crisis rarely, if ever, “speaks for itself.” The definition of a situation is, as social scientists say, the outcome of a subjective process. More often than not people will differ in their perception and appreciation of a threat. In fact, we might say that crisis definitions are continuously subjected to the forces of politicization (Edelman, 1977). One man’s crisis may be another man’s opportunity.

Even if consensus would exist that a serious threat is emerging, the status of this new problem is far from assured. Governments deal with urgent problems every day; attention to one problem takes away attention from another. For a threat to be recognized as a crisis, it must clear firmly entrenched hurdles (Birkland, 1997; Bovens & 't Hart, 1996).

Now that we have explored the origins of crisis, let us see how public authorities deal with these forms of emerging adversity. If they fail, the actions of crisis managers will feed straight back into an escalatory process with potentially disastrous consequences.

## **CRISIS MANAGEMENT: CRUCIAL CHALLENGES FOR LEADERSHIP**

Citizens whose lives are affected by critical contingencies expect governments and public agencies to do their utmost to keep them out of harm’s way. They expect the officials in charge to make critical decisions and provide direction even in the most difficult circumstances. So do the journalists that produce the stories that help to shape the crisis in the minds of the public. And so do members of parliament, public interest groups, institutional watchdogs, and other voices on the political stage that monitor and influence the behavior of leaders. However misplaced, unfair, or illusory these expectations may be hardly matters. These expectations are real in their political consequences (Thomas & Thomas, 1928).

The challenges of crisis management appear to be rising, not because the mechanisms of crisis have changed (the jury is still out on the issue, as discussed earlier). Crisis management has become more challenging because the democratic context has changed over the past decades. Analysts agree, for instance, that citizens and politicians alike have become at once more fearful and less tolerant of major hazards to public health, safety, and prosperity. The modern Western citizen has little patience for imperfections; he has come to fear glitches and has learned to see more of what he fears. In this culture of fear—sometimes referred to as the “risk society”—the role of the modern mass media is crucial (Beck, 1992).

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<sup>1</sup> Although much more pronounced today, the tendency to search for culprits following the occurrence of disaster and crisis is age old; see Drabek and Quarantelli (1967) as well as Douglas (1992).

In contemporary Western society, a crisis sets in motion extensive follow-up reporting, investigations by political forums as well as civil and criminal juridical proceedings. It is not uncommon for public officials and agencies to be singled out as the responsible actors for prevention, preparedness, and response failures. Public leaders must defend themselves against seemingly incontrovertible evidence of their incompetence, ignorance, or insensitivity.

Crisis management should not be viewed just in terms of the coping capacity of governmental institutions and public policies; it should be considered a deeply controversial and intensely political activity (Habermas, 1975; Edelman, 1977; 't Hart, 1993). This translates into five critical challenges for crisis management: *sense making*, *decision making*, *meaning making*, *terminating*, and *learning* (Boin, 't Hart, Stern, & Sundelius, 2005). Let us now briefly review these challenges in somewhat more detail.

### Sense Making

A crisis seems to pose a straightforward challenge: once a crisis becomes manifest, crisis managers must take measures to deal with its consequences. Reality is much more complex, however. Most crises do not materialize with a big bang; they are the product of escalation. Policymakers must recognize from vague, ambivalent, and contradictory signals that something out of the ordinary is developing. The critical nature of these developments is not self-evident; policymakers have to “make sense” of them (Edelman, 1977).

They must appraise the threat and decide what the crisis is about. However penetrating the events that trigger a crisis—jet planes hitting skyscrapers, thousands of people found dead in mass graves—a uniform picture of the events rarely emerges: Do they constitute a tragedy, an outrage, perhaps a punishment, or, inconceivably, a blessing in disguise? Crisis managers will have to determine how threatening the events are, to what or whom, what their operational and strategic parameters are, and how the situation will develop in the period to come. Signals come from all kinds of sources: some loud, some soft, some accurate, some widely off the mark. But how to tell which is which? How to distill cogent signals from the noise of crisis?

Research findings suggest that crisis managers often have a hard time meeting this challenge. The bewildering pace, ambiguity, and complexity of crises can easily overwhelm normal modes of situation assessment. Stress may further impair sense-making abilities. The organizations in which crisis managers typically function tend to produce additional barriers to crisis recognition. In fact, research shows that organizations are unable to detect even the most simple incubation processes with few factors, interacting according to standard patterns and taking a long lead time (Turner, 1978).

It is not all bad news. Some groups of people are known for their ability to remain their cool and to stay clear-headed under pressure. They have developed a mode of information processing that enables competent performance under crisis conditions (Flin, 1996; Klein, 2001). Veteran military officers, journalists, as well as fire and police commanders are known for this. Senior politicians and bureaucrats are generally veterans too—veterans of countless political and bureaucratic battles during their rise to the power. Those who make it all the way to the top of the hill in competitive political-administrative systems tend to have relatively well developed mechanisms for coping with stress.

Some researchers also point to organizations that have developed a proactive culture of “looking for problems” in their environment. These so-called high-reliability organizations



have somehow developed a capacity for thorough yet fast-paced information processing under stressful conditions. The unresolved question is whether organizations can design these features into existing organizational cultures (Weick & Sutcliffe, 2002).

## Making Critical Decisions

Responding to crises confronts governments and public agencies with pressing choice opportunities. These can be of many kinds. The needs and problems triggered by the onset of crisis may be so enormous that the scarce resources available will have to be prioritized. This is much like politics as usual except that in crisis circumstances the disparities between demand and supply of public resources are much bigger; the situation remains unclear and volatile; and the time to think, consult, and gain acceptance for decisions is highly restricted. Crises also confront governments and leaders with issues they do not face on a daily basis, for example, concerning the deployment of the military, the use of lethal force, or the radical restriction of civil liberties.

The classic example of crisis decision making is the Cuban Missile Crisis (1963), during which U.S. President John F. Kennedy was presented with pictures of Soviet missile installations under construction in Cuba. The photos conveyed a geostrategic reality in the making that Kennedy considered unacceptable, and it was up to him to decide what to do about it. Whatever his choice from the options presented to him by his advisers—an air strike, an invasion of Cuba, a naval blockade—and however hard it was to predict the exact consequences, one thing seemed certain: the final decision would have a momentous impact on Soviet–American relations and possibly on world peace. Crisis decision-making is making hard calls, which involve tough value tradeoffs and major political risks (Brecher, 1993; Janis, 1989).

Many pivotal crisis decisions are *not* taken by individual leaders or by small informal groups of senior policymakers. They emerge from various alternative loci of decision making and coordination ('t Hart, Rosenthal, & Kouzmin, 1993; McConnell, 2003). In fact, the crisis response in modern society is best characterized in terms of a network. This is not necessarily counterproductive, many leaders have learned, as delegation of decision-making authority down the line usually enhances resilience rather than detracting from it.

An effective response also requires interagency and intergovernmental coordination. After all, each decision must be implemented by a set of organizations; only when these organizations work together is there a chance that effective implementation will happen. Getting public bureaucracies to adapt to crisis circumstances is a daunting, and some say impossible, task in itself. Most public organizations were originally designed to conduct routine business in accordance with such values as fairness, lawfulness, and efficiency. The management of crisis, however, requires flexibility, improvisation, redundancy, and the breaking of rules.

Coordination is not a self-evident feature of crisis management operations. The question of who is in charge typically arouses great passions. In disaster studies, the “battle of the Samaritans” is a well-documented phenomenon: agencies representing different technologies of crisis coping find it difficult to align their actions. Moreover, a crisis does not make the public suddenly “forget” the sensitivities and conflicts that governed the daily relations between authorities and others in fairly recent times.

A truly effective crisis response is to a large extent the result of a naturally evolving process. It cannot be managed in linear, step-by-step, and comprehensive fashion from a single crisis center, however full of top decision makers and stacked with state of the art information

technology. There are simply too many hurdles that separate a leadership decision from its timely execution in the field.

## Meaning Making

In a crisis, leaders are expected to reduce uncertainty and provide an authoritative account of what is going on, why it is happening, and what needs to be done. When they have made sense of the events and have arrived at some sort of situational appraisal and made strategic policy choices, leaders must get others to accept their definition of the situation. They must impute “meaning” to the unfolding crisis in such a way that their efforts to manage it are enhanced. If they do not, or if they do not succeed at it, their decisions will not be understood or respected. If other actors in the crisis succeed in dominating the meaning-making process, the ability of incumbent leaders to decide and maneuver is severely constrained.

Two problems often recur. First, public leaders are not the only ones trying to frame the crisis. Their messages coincide and compete with those of other parties, who hold other positions and interests, who are likely to espouse various alternative definitions of the situation and advocate different courses of action. Censoring them is hardly a viable option in a democracy.

Second, authorities often cannot provide correct information right away. They struggle with the mountains of raw data (reports, rumors, pictures) that are quickly amassed when something extraordinary happens. Turning them into a coherent picture of the situation is a major challenge by itself. Getting it out to the public in the form of accurate, clear, and actionable information requires a major public relations effort. This effort is often hindered by the aroused state of the audience: people whose lives are deeply affected tend to be anxious if not stressed. Moreover, they do not necessarily see the government as their ally. And preexisting distrust of government does not evaporate in times of crisis.

## Terminating a Crisis

Governments—at least democratic ones—cannot afford to stay in crisis mode forever. A sense of normalcy will have to return sooner or later. It is a critical leadership challenge to make this happen in a timely and expedient fashion.

Crisis termination is twofold. It is about shifting back from emergency to routine mode. This requires some form of downsizing of crisis operations. At the strategic level, it also requires rendering account for what has happened and gaining acceptance for this account. These two aspects of crisis termination are distinct, but in practice often closely intertwined. The system of governance—its rules, its organizations, its power-holders—has to be (re)stabilized; it must regain the necessary legitimacy to perform its usual functions. Leaders cannot bring this about by unilateral decree, even if they may possess the formal mandate to initiate and terminate crises in a legal sense (by declaring a state of disaster or by evoking martial law). Formal termination gestures can follow but never lead the mood of a community. Premature closure may even backfire: allegations of underestimation and cover-up are quick to emerge in an opinion climate that is still on edge.

The burden of proof in accountability discussions lies with leaders: they must establish beyond doubt that they cannot be held responsible for the occurrence or escalation of a crisis. These accountability debates can easily degenerate into “blame games” with a focus on identifying and punishing “culprits” rather than discursive reflection about the full range of causes

and consequences.<sup>2</sup> The challenge for leaders is to cope with the politics of crisis accountability without resorting to undignified and potentially self-defeating defensive tactics of blame avoidance that only serve to prolong the crisis by transforming it into a political confrontation at knife's edge.

Crisis leaders can be competent and conscientious, but that alone says little about how their performance will be evaluated when the crisis is over. Policymakers and agencies that failed to perform their duties prior to or during the critical stages need not despair, however: if they "manage" the political game of the crisis aftermath well, they may prevent losses to their reputation, autonomy, and resources. Crises have winners and losers. The political (and legal) dynamics of the accountability process determines which crisis actors end up where (Brändström & Kuipers, 2003).

## Learning

Political and organizational lesson-drawing constitutes the final challenge. A crisis offers a reservoir of potential lessons for contingency planning and training for future crises. One would expect all those involved to study these lessons and feed them back into organizational practices, policies, and laws.

Lesson-drawing is one of the most underdeveloped aspects of crisis management (Lagadec, 1997; Stern, 1997). In addition to cognitive and institutional barriers to learning, lesson-drawing is constrained by the role of these lessons in determining the impact that crises have on a society. Crises become part of collective memory, a source of historical analogies for future leaders (Khong, 1992; Sturken, 1997). The political depiction of crisis as a product of prevention and foresight failures would force people to rethink the assumptions on which preexisting policies and rule systems rested. Other stakeholders in the game of crisis-induced lesson-drawing might seize upon the lessons to advocate measures and policy reforms that incumbent leaders reject. Leaders thus have a large stake in steering the lesson-drawing process in the political and bureaucratic arenas. The crucial challenge here is to achieve a dominant influence on the feedback stream that crises generate into preexisting policy networks and public organizations.

The documentation of these inhibiting complexities has done nothing to dispel the near-utopian belief in crisis *opportunities* that is found not only in academic literature, but also in popular wisdom (Boin & 't Hart, 2003). A crisis is seen as a good time to clean up and start anew. Crises then represent discontinuities that must be seized upon—a true test of leadership, the experts claim. So most people are not surprised to see sweeping reforms in the wake of crisis: That will never happen again! They intuitively distrust leaders who claim bad luck and point out that their organizations and policy have a great track record.

Crises tend to cast long shadows upon the political systems in which they occur. It is only when we study these longer term processes that we are able to assess the full impact of crises. Unfortunately, such studies are rare (but see Birkland, 1997; Kurtz & Browne, 2004). Most studies of the "crisis aftermath" of emergencies have been about community reconstruction, individual and collective trauma, and legal battles. We need to complement these studies by taking a broader macrosocial perspective that looks at collective "learning" for an entire nation, polity, or society in the aftermath of crisis. It remains an open question if crises tend to serve as triggers of systemic change or if they serve to forestall such change, and to what extent these processes can be channeled by good crisis governance.

## CONCLUSION: THE CRISIS APPROACH RECONSIDERED

The crisis approach outlined in this chapter provides a framework for understanding the dynamic evolution of crisis and the prospects for public management of urgent threats. The approach adopts a long time line, which makes it possible to trace a crisis from its early roots to its burial in public memory. It admonishes the research community to complement operational perspectives with political perspectives. Most importantly, perhaps, is its capacity to tease out the interplay between crisis dynamics and response failures.

Two lessons seem of particular relevance to practitioners. First, one should accept that even the richest and most competent government imaginable can never guarantee that major disruptions will not occur. Policymakers cannot escape the dilemmas of crisis response by banking on crisis prevention. Crisis prevention is a necessary and indeed vitally important strategy, but it pertains only to known emergencies—those that happened before. This requires a strategy of resilience (Wildavsky, 1988). This lesson resonates with key insights in the disaster field.

The second lesson reminds us that 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. The intensity or scope of a crisis is thus not solely determined by the nature of the threat, the level of uncertainty, or the time available to decision makers. A crisis is to a considerable extent what people—influenced by the inevitable mass media onslaught following an unscheduled event—make of it.

Why people collectively label and experience a situation as a crisis remains somewhat of a mystery. Physical facts, numbers, and other seemingly objective indicators are important factors, but they are not decisive. A flood that kills 200 people is a more or less routine emergency in Bangladesh, but it would be experienced as a major crisis in, say, Miami or Paris. Crises are in the eye of the beholder. It is people's frames of reference, experience and memory, values and interests that determine their perceptions of crisis. A sense of "collective stress" results not just from some objective threat, but also from the intricate interaction between events, individual perceptions, media representations, political reactions, and government efforts at "meaning making."

This process of collective understanding is one of escalation and de-escalation. It is subject to the influence of actors who have a stake in playing up a crisis mood, or playing it down. And this is exactly what happens when unexpected incidents or major disruptions are predicted or actually occur: different political, bureaucratic, societal, and international stakeholders will not only form their own picture of the situation and classify it in terms of threats and opportunities, but many of them will actively seek to influence the public perception of the situation. Once a particular definition of the situation has taken hold in mass media and political discourse, it becomes a political reality that policymakers have to take into account and act upon. Initial definitions tend to be persistent.

An effective crisis response will inevitably require a two-pronged strategy: dealing with the events "on the ground" (whether literally as in civil emergencies or, metaphorically, as in a currency or stock market crisis); and dealing with the political upheaval and instability triggered by these events. Neglecting one or the other is detrimental to any attempt to exercise public leadership in a crisis.

These lessons help us to flag two challenges for further research. First, much work remains to be done on the understanding of crisis dynamics. If crises cannot be prevented, we must learn to recognize them in time. Early warning can work only if it builds on a solid theory of

crisis development. Second, researchers need to invest in a better understanding of resilience. Crisis researchers tend to agree (with disaster researchers we should note) that resilience may be one of the key strategies to deal with system breakdowns. Much more systematic work needs to be done on the identification of mechanisms that provide for resilient societies.

Understanding crisis development will contribute to our understanding of disasters. The continued and deepened collaboration between crisis researchers in all their different niches and the field of disaster studies should therefore receive—an easily accomplishable—priority. Our chapter in this book aims to do just that.