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Crisis management in government

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Crises form the ultimate threat to safety, security and policy legitimacy: core values of public sector organizations in democratic regimes. They can take many shapes and forms, think of the COVID-19 pandemic which exhaustively challenged authorities at multiple levels of governance for over 18 months at the time of writing, but also of sudden power outages, ICT breakdowns, natural hazard-induced disasters such as earthquakes or floods, terrorist attacks or transportation crashes.

Although these situations seem highly diverse, they pose similar challenges to public managers. The key characteristics of crises are that they form a serious threat, or are perceived as such by stakeholders, to the core values and critical functioning of an organization, system or community. They require decisive reactions: the time pressure to intervene in order to prevent or mitigate the negative consequences is high, infections spread exponentially, or the slow-burning consequences of an ongoing threat are irreversible (see for an insightful typology regarding temporal dimensions of crises Boin, Ekengren and Rhinard, 2020). Lastly, crises go hand in hand with profound uncertainty with respect to their causes, vectors, response options and consequences (Rosenthal et al., 1989; Boin et al, 2016). As such, crises form negative surprises and often expose previously unknown or unaddressed vulnerabilities (Parker et al., 2009).

Public sector organizations have a key role to play in preventing vulnerabilities and managing an effective response to threats and crises. Protection of citizens is a primary task of government. In exchange for delegation of the monopoly on violence to their government, citizens expect protection—against all possible hazards. Safety incident investigations therefore do not so much focus on the hazard itself (the hurricane that damaged the offshore oil drilling rig), but on exposed deficiencies and organizational responsibilities for the risks that materialized and their consequences (Pursiainen, 2017). Accountability debates focus immediately on public sector organizations (Who was

the regulating authority? Who licensed the company? Who set the standards? Who did the inspections? Who responded to the emergency? Who informed citizens? Who leads us out of this crisis?). After all, it is often public sector organizations that bear the responsibility for societal safety and security (Boin et al., 2018).

Constituting pillars

Although crisis management could be labeled as “public management when it matters most”, the crisis management literature did not rise from the field of public management studies. In search of understanding the complexity and dynamics of crises, researchers have in fact borrowed from all social sciences.¹ Major global conflicts gave rise to early crisis studies from an International Relations perspective, analyzing conflicts in terms of decision making at the highest strategic levels. Their focus is on threat perception, bureau-politics, and political leadership and group dynamics. These authors in turn use insights from political psychology to understand how individuals and groups deal with stress and uncertainty. Psychologists further inform crisis research through their work on human error, avoidance thereof and how people in organizations perceive and deal with risks.

Sociology has contributed heavily to our knowledge and understanding of crisis and crisis management through the subfields of organization sociology and disaster sociology. Organization theory produced powerful insights into organizational causes of crises and how high reliability organizations organize for safety. They argue that system complexity and tight coupling of processes and system components, combined with limits of human intelligence can produce disasters in unforeseeable yet expectable ways. The silver lining is that with sufficient dedication to safety as an organizational and collective priority, reliability of high risk operations is still possible. Disaster sociology gave us a thorough understanding of collective behavior, collaboration in crisis and disaster response and the pathologies of planning, preparedness and coordination. More recently, the rediscovery of resilience helps to explain why some communities respond and recover better in times of crises and disaster than others.

From business administration, we gained hands-on understanding from their prescriptive

work on how to deal with reputation threats, crisis communication challenges, disruptions to business continuity and other adversities that threaten the sustainability and profitability of companies.

Building on the insights from the above strands of research, Boin et al. (2016) have crafted a comprehensive monograph on the politics of crisis management that informs executives in the public sector of the strategic challenges they face when crises emerge. They identify several leadership challenges, of which the first three will be presented here in the context of public management. First, a brief account will be given on what crises mean to public managers, followed by what the strategic leadership tasks imply for public management.

A public management for all crises?

Public management aims to improve the quality and efficiency of public service delivery by public organizations (in cooperation with private companies, independent agencies, NGOs, citizens and so on) in light of the public interests they serve. From crisis studies we learn that the greatest threat to public managers comes from external adversity and risks within their organizations that influence their ability to function optimally. In recent work, we identified three types of crises that are relevant here (Kuipers and Wolbers, 2021).

- Crises that occur *in* organizations: these are the tangible threats or incidents that completely cripple an organization's primary process or performance. Their cause and consequences are first and foremost confined to the organization and to those affected by its malperformance or discontinuity. Think of the cyberattack that paralyzed NHS hospitals in the UK, the terrorist attack on Brussels airport, or the power outage in Amsterdam that also left its emergency switchboard for 112 calls temporarily inoperable.
- Crises that form threats *to* the organization: when an incident occurs or problems emerge outside of the organization at hand, but its occurrence compromises the organization because stakeholders attribute responsibility or culpability to the organization for causing the crisis or allowing it to occur. This happens when public organizations are accused of, for

instance, regulatory omissions, failed implementation, or inadequate preparedness. The US Army Corps of Engineers comes to mind with regards to the failing levees during the landfall of hurricane Katrina in New Orleans.

- Crisis *about* the organization, or *institutional crisis*: this happens when an organization's perceived performance deficit has become so deeply problematic in a short period of time that the organization itself becomes subject to intense criticism. Although some members or outsiders of the organization have seen it coming, an institutional crisis often comes across as surprising and deeply "unjust" from the perspective of the organization involved. Suddenly, values and routines that were previously accepted, as well as the set up and policy philosophy of the organization, are no longer seen as appropriate or legitimate. A famous example is the legitimacy decline of the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA), a jewel in the crown of Roosevelt's 1933 New Deal, which aimed to economically develop the Tennessee Valley region, to manage its floods and erosion problems, to produce hydroelectricity through its coastal works such as dams, and to function as a yardstick for the budding electricity-producing industry in the US. The TVA was successful, for decades, meanwhile drifting from producing hydroelectricity to exploiting coal plants and later onto providing nuclear energy, which became the nail in its coffin. In 1985, the US Nuclear Regulatory Commission concluded that the TVA had spiraled out of control and forced it to close down five of its reactors for safety reasons.

The leadership tasks for public managers that Boin et al. present in their work, are different for the above types of crisis. The first type will ask a far more functional approach (damage mitigation, restoring the vital process, care for those affected) and the latter two crises are – although they can impede functioning of the organization – inherently political (see for a distinction between functional and political crisis management: Nohrstedt et al., 2018). This chapter selects the first three leadership tasks – sense making, decision making and meaning making – that Boin et al. (2016) present, for

more in-depth discussion in relation to both public management and to the crisis types above.

Sense making

With hindsight, it always seems clear what a particular crisis was about, but when a threat first manifests itself, managers struggle to arrive at a uniform picture. Initial information is often unverified, unspecific, contradictory, and very incomplete. When the first COVID-19 patient was identified in Europe, policymakers still had no clue of the devastating global pandemic about to follow in the year 2020, and national health authorities varied widely in their mostly delayed reactions. In the first phase of the crisis, “crisis managers have to determine how threatening events are, to what or to whom, what their operational and strategic parameters are, and how the situation will develop in the period to come” (Boin et al., 2018, p. 31). They often have to do so under conditions of profound uncertainty.

The functional approach to sense making entails the intricacies of arriving with multiple actors at a “common operational picture”: agreement and clarity on cause and effect. Right after the “bang” (if there is one), authorities need to find out what caused it, if the threat continues or has subsided, what the damage is and to whom, and what response has priority. Public managers can prepare by creating and rehearsing a sense-making method to process information from multiple sources and of varying quality, to manage the push of less relevant information or “noise” that emerges in huge quantities, and augment the quality thereof, and to pull intelligence required for decision making. They need to ensure this information is shared and verified with the appropriate actors, and that feedback loops are in place for follow up actions. This method allows the upkeep of a dynamic picture that those involved understand and recognize, to analyze possible scenarios, and constantly articulate further specific information needs (Boin et al., 2013).

If a crisis is of a more creeping nature, or if it affects the legitimacy of the organizations involved or pertains to the organization as the implicated party or the subject of the crisis, a more political approach is key. In that case sense making pertains to finding out and agreeing on what is at stake. A terrorist attack may

be defined as narrow as an emergency that temporarily disrupts public life and harms people or property or as wide as a clash between states, ideologies, religions and fundamental rights. When organizations are in focus, a food safety issue or a plane crash may become a crisis of failed regulatory oversight. When leadership of an organization fails to perceive the situation as such, it may come across as out of touch with reality or out of control – setting off a dynamic that could spiral into an institutional crisis (Kuipers and Wolbers, 2021). As we will see below, the political interpretation of the situation is closely linked to meaning making in the crisis response.

Sense making goes hand in hand with taking up responsibility, at the appropriate level and policy domain, for the response. Sense making implies deciding whether an issue is “Chefsache” or not. Also, the understanding of the situation implies whether an organization decides it has any role to play. When Swedish tourists were stranded in Thailand after a tsunami hit the Phuket region after Christmas in 2004, policymakers at the Swedish ministry of foreign affairs were slow to realize the scope of the disaster and how much it was on their ministry’s plate to find missing persons, repatriate people and reassure the relatives in distress. Initial interpretations of what the crisis is about, immediately affect “whose” crisis it is with implications for the next leadership challenge: decision making.

Decision making

Public managers take far-reaching decisions every day, intervening in people’s lives, prospects and surroundings. Decision making in crisis elevates all aspects of taking decisions to problematic levels: pressure goes up, uncertainty increases, expectations rise, impact builds up, scarcity peaks, and often leaders face all of this when treading uncharted territory. The territory can be relatively uncharted because authorities need to take decisions involving exceptional mandates, such as the use of lethal force, deployment of the military, or the restriction of civil liberties (Boin et al., 2018).

Furthermore, public managers at all levels unexpectedly need to work with partners they have not collaborated with before (commercial airlines, electricity or internet service providers, social media platforms, chemical industry plants) or they depend on actions by authorities

on the other side of the planet to address zero-day vulnerabilities or find DNA strings of a new zoonotic disease. Intense cooperation between organizations in a non-hierarchical network that is relatively new and under severe performance pressure is a typical crisis challenge (Boin and Bynander, 2015).

Similar to situations not coming up with a label of what the situation is about, strategic decisions “do not come with labels indicating whether they are best made at the strategic or operational level” (Boin et al., 2013, p. 83). In fact, strategic decisions at the top of the hierarchy are few and far between. Meanwhile, operational demand peaks so leaders may be tempted to micromanage (Leonard and Howitt, 2009). Oftentimes, pivotal decisions are indeed taken at the decentral, local or community level, where self-organization emerges in response to extreme events (Comfort and Okada, 2013). From a functional perspective, public leadership is about how to enable operations on the ground by intervening and removing boundaries to cooperation (Nooteboom and Termeer, 2013).

From a political perspective, the legitimacy of strategic decisions is, in retrospect – the accountability phase – judged by their adherence to due process within given limitations (George, 1980), the reaffirmation of core values and the principles of subsidiarity and proportionality (Leonard and Howitt, 2009).

Meaning making

Not only do crisis managers struggle to come to an agreed upon common operational picture of the threat they face with their organizations, and its implications, they also need to communicate publicly about their interpretation of events. In all types of crisis, they can respond in ways that even make the crisis worse if they fail to reach out (Pursiainen, 2017).

For the crises in organizations, the functional challenge to public managers is that their (private) partners work at different speeds, are driven by different interests (commercial interests, specific community needs) and are bound by different formal and unwritten rules regarding verification of information, confidentiality, mandates, and uniformity of their message. A key lesson in crisis communication holds that responsiveness is crucial to communicate to stakeholders and affected populations messages of empathy, appeals for solidarity (such

as in response to terrorist attacks), recognition of how the crisis affects people and basic information on what they can do to keep themselves from harm, or where they can find reliable updates (Boin et al., 2016; Fearn-Banks, 2007). Coordination of outgoing communication between collaborating partners is vital (Boin et al., 2013).

Crises that give rise to criticism about the organization's role in their prevention require more than a functional and emotionally appropriate response. They require a frame that is in line with, or responds well to the public perception of the crisis. Sometimes, the organization is on the defense and launches an unconvincing counterframe, such as Union Carbide after the Bhopal disaster (Chouhan, 2005) or the state-owned gas production company and Ministry of Economic Affairs responsible for gas exploitation-induced earthquakes in the Netherlands (Schmidt et al., 2018).

Institutional crises, in which the organization is not criticized for its contribution to an incident but for its entire policy philosophy or way of working, can result in a meaning making battle. Such crises first require from public managers that these managers recognize the gap between expectations and performance that will trigger the sudden decline of legitimacy of their organization or policy sector. An incident may have been the symbolic trigger that, as in the case with the US Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) after hurricane Katrina, “laid bare [its] perceived state of decomposition” (Ansell et al., 2016, p. 416; Roberts, 2013). In terms of meaning making, blame games between political actors, or self-congratulating comments such as “Brownie, you’re doing a heck of a job” by then president George W. Bush, further increase the public outrage (see Spike Lee’s documentary, *When the Levees Break* for a vivid illustration). Recognition of what is at stake, a reaffirmation of core values in response to public criticism and convincing orientation towards legitimate recovery or institutional reform is key to effective meaning making in the face of such profound integrity crises.

Conclusion

This chapter outlined a typology of organizational crises for public managers and what insights the crisis literature offers. A cruise past the scholarly disciplines that contributed to

these insights offered more references for further consultation. Key to all crises and crisis management efforts that follow is recognition of the threat that is posed to the core values that public managers are supposed to serve. Early recognition of the connection between incidents and values is what guides not only effective responses by public managers but also what makes the difference between incidents and further escalation into potential institutional crises.

SANNEKE KUIPERS

See also

Strategic Management in National Government, Policing and Public Management, Power in Public Management

Note

1. See Boin et al. (2018) for a literature overview and specific references to the crisis research legacies from the different fields of study discussed in this section.

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