

Managing Crisis: an Overview of Challenges and Priorities for Public Managers and Leaders Facing Disasters

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The operative/instrumental level

Traditionally, most of social scientifics who study operative/instrumental crisis management has shared the idea that this one does not include only the simple coordination and response to immediate consequences of disasters at their acute moments. It displays characteristics that are more complex and raises to the public authorities and “crisis managers” more exigencies than the simple reactive decision-making about coordination and mobilization of human resources.

It is difficult to determine exactly the “crisis manager” profile as different to “crisis leader” profile. Among other reasons, it must be due to which both profiles can present such separate as simultaneous (Natera, 2001). Interdisciplinary works associated to “New Leadership” approach tend to come together into emphasis for marking difference between (true) leadership and (simple) management conceived this last one as “old” leadership (Natera and Vanaclocha, 2005). The managers/leaders distinction has its basis in elemental differentiation between leadership and authority. However, the classic formulation of leadership/management differences date from Zaleznik’s contribution (1977), while Kotter’s contribution (1990; 2000) has reached great dissemination and approval in and out academic field. Kotter points out that leadership and management are two different “action systems”, although “complementary systems”, and he tends to share the idea that management deals to complexity in organizations, searching order, stability and coherence; whereas leadership deals to change through implementation of a vision into organizational reality.

Scientific literature about crisis usually distinguishes, in a conventional way, different crisis management “phases” or dimensions that give account of this complexity.¹ These dimensions represent important challenges for “crisis managers” and demand different operative capacities, as well as different management priorities (*Table 1*).

Prevention challenge

It represents the capacity to diagnose on time emergent threats that could unleash a crisis, to intervene effectively on the early symptoms of the same one, as well as to make to come to the public managers the information obtained from a systematically monitoring. Preferably, management priorities for responding prevention challenge are related (or must relate) to the design of analysis, classification, monitoring and environmental-risk early detection systems.

Preparation Challenge

¹ See, for example, the recent report supported by the European Science Foundation (Ekendren and Rhinard, 2005), or the well-known compilation of texts about crisis management from Rosenthal, Boin and Comfort (2001).

It relates to the capacity for anticipating to probable features that the crisis scene is going to present and to prepare, definitively, for facing uncertainty. Here, the main management priority is the design and formalization of contingency plans and action protocols. They must be tested and updated through specific programs of simulation.

Response Challenge

It demands to face the immediate exigencies of the disaster to limit the damage. For this one, it is fundamental, like a management priority, the quick activation and effective implementation of the plans of contingencies and action protocols previously designed, where the coordination between units and the effective mobilization of human, material and financial resources are crucial elements.

Post Crisis Challenge

It takes shape, on the one hand, in the process of reconstruction (the return to normality) and, on the other hand, in the capacity to formalize and/or to institutionalize the learned lessons to respond to future crises (maintenance or operative learning). It is so the operational management priorities are detached here in one double slope: the design and activation of reconstruction plans, accompanied habitually by special measures by aid to the victims; and the redesign of early detection systems, monitoring and cataloguing of risks, as well as of contingency plans and action protocols.

Operative/instrumental level: Challenges and Management Priorities

Table 1

<i>Challenges</i>	<i>Management Priorities link to Public Authorities acting as “Crisis Managers”</i>
(a) Crisis Prevention	(a) Design: Early Detection Systems. Classification and Monitoring Risk Systems
(b) Crisis Preparedness	(b) Design and Update: Contingency Plans, Action Protocols
(c) Crisis Response	(c) Speeding up and Implementation: Contingency Plans, Action Protocols
(d) Post Crisis	(d) Speeding up Reconstruction Plans, and Re-Design of (a) and (b) through institutionalization of the “maintenance or operative learning”.

Source: The author’s elaborations based on categories provided by Boin, Ekengren Rhinard (2005) and Rosenthal, Boin, Comfort (2001).

As we can see, it is possible to understand the challenges described like separable dimensions to analytical effects, although we can also conceive these ones like a “management circuit” in which the lessons learned in the post crisis can provide (ideally) feedback to the prevention, as well as to the planning and the response.

The “other side” for managing crisis: political/ communicative level

Together with operative/instrumental management of the environmental catastrophe, it is also very important the management of which we are denominated political/communicative level that in all environmental crisis is present of a way or another one.

This complex level is composed by all those perceptive, mediatic-communicative, cognitive-symbolic components, as well as fussy elements of political dynamics in interaction with the expectations and collective images, that public authorities -acting as leaders- face, often strategically, in the management of the catastrophe, mainly in the response and post crisis”phases”.

Nevertheless, the emphasis that traditional scientist literature on crisis has put in the “technology” of the response to the catastrophe (in the components of instrumental/operative level) has been condemning those political aspects and of strategic communication to a “black box of contextual factors”. Some authors view political aspects often like “problems” that are crossed in the way obstructing of the “effective” response to the crisis. It is probably that the political/communicative level has not studied with greater depth by discomfort or complex to the eyes of analysts and public authorities.²

Here we understand, on the contrary, that crisis management success depends as much on the suitable response to political challenges and of strategic communication like properly operative-instrumental ones. We must think that, often, the collective perceptions of insecurity or vulnerability, the stress and intensity of emotions or the conflicts between values and interests in competition emerge in such a way that they finish defining the own crisis, in greater way than the “objective” events and independently of the (supposed) effectiveness whereupon is being developed the operative/instrumental management.³

Political/communicative challenges present some characteristics that are very much alike the concept of “adaptive challenge”, formulated by Heifetz (1994). He defines an “adaptive challenge” as a type of problem or situation that reflects a cleavage or conflict between the systems of beliefs of the people, or between the beliefs and the circumstances. Among the features of adaptive challenges, pointed out by the author, are (1) the difficulty to provide technical responses or routine procedures, (2) the non-existence of “magical” solutions nor clear responses on the part of the public authorities, (3) the implication of a plurality of actors and values in competition. In addition, an adaptive challenge requires orchestrating a process of innovating learning based, mainly, in the implementation of “inclusive policies” and promoted by a leadership process.

Among interrelated challenges of “political management”⁴ and strategic communication (again, link to different management priorities), which must fundamentally face the “crisis leaders”, we can point up the next ones (*Table 2*).

² References from Hart (1993: 39). Indeed, this author will finish proposing an alternative conceptualization of crisis management as symbolic action.

³ This is a part of “social constructivism” approach in crisis management. It emphasises the reconstruction of crisis definition by social actors and political leaders, that is, “the context is reconstructed as a political arena not a scientific laboratory” (Grint, 2005: 1467).

⁴ Expression proposed by Moore (1992). For this author, “political management” would integrate a great variety of activities, included the strategic and communicative ones.

The Challenge of Diagnosis

Ambiguity and confusion are two of the recurrent characteristics of the environmental catastrophes. Usually, main actors implied (scientists, technicians, public authorities...) have divergent positions, and a plurality of ideas and perceptions about crisis scenario and how to face it suitably. The character, often unique and exceptional of the catastrophe, as well as the scarcity (or excess) of information (perhaps contradictory or inexact) on the same one, causes, among other effects, that the application without substantial deviations of contingency plans and standardized action protocols is difficult. As a result of it, one management priority in the political-strategic communication indeed consists of the clarification the scene, by means of the comparison of more points of view for understanding situation and compilation a greater number of information fonts with which to make a "realistic examination". In this activity, the role of high-level public authorities is decisive.

The Challenge of Plurality of Values, Views and Interests

A great number of actors display their strategies and activities in the environmental catastrophes: public authorities, technicians, corporative actors, emergency units or organizations, diffuse voluntary, military units, nongovernmental organizations ... Everyone displays and confronts his or her own values and interests, and these one are not always (politically) innocent. They gamble a lot, their prestige included: some of them, because they legitimize their own existence by means of its suitable performance in catastrophes (like, for example, the emergency specialized units), others, because they can see decreased their "power sources" or "political capital".

It is not surprising, therefore, that conflict is always present with greater or smaller intensity and that one of the political/communicative priorities is to handle conflicting views, trying to make the adjustment between different factions and actors and trying to build the commitment of each actor in the perspective from the other to obtain a viable respect. For this reason, public authorities acting as crisis leaders used to develop the strategy of no-exclusion and the strategy of controlled promotion of participation, in function the degree of actor's sensibilization in relation to the crisis and, in many times, in search of "political profitability".⁵

The Challenge of Emotions

It is very well known the intensity of the affective-dramatic component and the collective stress associated to environmental catastrophes. In addition, the mediatic cover, the values and interests in competition and the political debate more or less interested usually amplify them.

In any case, it is obviously fundamental, like basic priority for crisis leaders, to set up a "holding environment" (in Freud's expression) that reduces "emotional temperature" of collectivity.

The instruments for doing this "emotional rescue" are varied and multipurpose to deal with other challenges:

- approval of a "reassuring" legal disposition,
- creation of a claim office for victims,
- participation promotion of individual or collective actors,
- communication through rituals that stage solidarity or consolation with the affected people and victims; or even
- confrontation and resentment with (presumed) "enemy" that caused disaster.

⁵ Vanaclocha, Martínón, Losada (2005). In addition, this suggestive work analyses the specific relationships among the concepts of sensibilization, political profitability (PPB) and learning in the management of environmental catastrophes.

The Challenge of Legitimacy

Environmental disasters break down security perception and cause delegitimation of some institutions and actors. For this reason, among political and communicative priorities are those destined to generate trust in institutional responses to the crisis. In fact, it is habitual to use communication for “masking” (Hart, 1993)⁶ possible perception of vulnerability. For example, leaders can use communication processes for deviation public opinion from crisis perception towards well-known and “normal” images, or for moving collective attention from crisis towards other subjects of public debate, or even for darkening of details -perhaps “frightful” details – about operative management of the crisis.

Political/communicative level: Challenges and Management Priorities

Table 2

<i>Challenges</i>	<i>Management Priorities link to Public Authorities acting as “Crisis Leaders”</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Crisis Diagnosis 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Making clear Collective Perceptions about events by a good communication management
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Plurality of Values, Views and Interests 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cutting down Conflict and boosting Participation
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Emotional Rescue 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reduce “emotional temperature” of the collectivity by setting up a “holding environment”
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Legitimacy Challenge 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enhancing trust and safety about institutional responses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Opportunity Window 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Taking advantage of crisis: Political Profitability (PPB); recognize and exploit middle- and long-term opportunities (“innovating learning”)

Source: The author’s work.

The Challenge of Opportunity

In addition, we can view environmental catastrophes like an “opportunity window”⁷: opportunity for transformation of political and administrative structures, opportunity for certain political actors that they obtain a great political or electoral profitability; and opportunity for learning of civil society and of the own political-administrative elites. Upon this last sense, we can distinguish fundamentally between *maintenance learning*, impelled by “crisis managers”, and the *innovating learning*, impelled basically by “crisis leaders” (Table 3).

⁶ For this author, “masking” is also a useful strategy to control the dramaturgy and the format of political communication.

⁷ Kingdon (1995) elaborated “policy window” theory. Synthetically, it can understand as moments or situations for implementing a (incremental or radical) change of policies.

Maintenance learning vs. Innovating Learning

Table 3

Maintenance learning	Innovating Learning
It produces views, methods and fixed rules to deal with well-known and recurrent situations	It produces middle-/long-term change, renovation, and re-formulation of problems
It develops organizational capacity to solve routine problems	It focuses in organizational preparation and team training for performance in new challenges and situations.
It holds an stable system that provides standardized responses	It deals with emergent crisis and exceptional problems (non-routine responses, sensibility to controversy and doubt)

Source: The author's elaborations based on categories provided by Laguedec (1997) and Bennis, Nanus (2001).

To conclude, we can state -at least, in a hypothetical way- that operative/instrumental level is typically conducted by rational models of decision-making and by cognitive maps of reference, as a tendency, "universal". On the contrary, we think that the political/communicative level is bound to incremental or reactive models of decision-making and, also, depends on cognitive maps of reference closely tie to the specific national context and of the values that conform the corresponding civic culture.

It is not surprising, therefore, which it is difficult to identify "crisis leaders" generic styles or profiles, and that the political/communicative challenges which leadership activity faces, must view and assess to the light of the environmental crisis scene that it is exceptional, unique and usually displays unexpected features.

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