

# **Issue Management as a post-crisis discipline: Identifying and responding to issue impacts beyond the crisis.**

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- While there is a prolific literature on processes for organizational crisis management, and extensive scholarship on response methodologies such as apologia, image restoration and immediate post-crisis discourse, little has been written about the longer term post-crisis challenge beyond recovery, business resumption and organizational learning.
- Crises can lead to persistent and damaging issues, but there has been limited substantive research to illuminate the optimal processes to navigate the transition from crisis to issue. Moreover, if organizations remain in conventional post-crisis mode there is a real risk of failure to put in place proper processes for longer term management of post-crisis issues.
- After considering linear and non-linear process models, and the development of a more holistic, integrated approach to issue and crisis management, this article proposes issue management as the most effective practical discipline to identify and respond to longer term post-crisis impacts.

## **Introduction**

Although crisis management as a formal corporate discipline is relatively young, less than three decades has seen a dramatic growth in interest and an extraordinary output of research and writing. Yet, when it comes to the important area of post-crisis management, there is little consensus on the definition or parameters of that concept, and a real risk that organizations which remain in conventional post-crisis mode – with a focus primarily on business resumption and reputation recovery – may lack proper processes for effective management of longer term post-crisis issues. As will be shown, failure to identify and manage the distinct category of issues which arise in the wake of a crisis can lead to prolonged reputational damage or even corporate demise.

While crisis study developed in the 1960s and 1970s, especially in the fields of psychology, sociology and disaster response (Booth, 1993) it has been claimed that the era of formal organizational crisis management began in the United States after the notorious Tylenol poisoning scandal of 1982, and it was not established as an

independent research area in Europe until after the Chernobyl disaster in 1986 (for example, Falkheimer & Heide, 2006). As it subsequently developed, crisis management, has been described as a 'heavily applied field' where managers want tools they can use in the heat of crisis (Coombs, 2001). One result is that this has proved to be among the few areas of public affairs where both practitioners and academics have contributed substantially to the literature. In the process, practitioner writers have generally focused on 'how to' procedures and techniques (Devlin, 2007; Fink, 1986; Register & Larkin, 2005; Ruff & Aziz, 2003; Seymour & Moore, 2000). At the same time much of the academic scholarship has tended to address more theory-based response strategies including corporate apologia (Hearit, 1995, 2006; Rowland & Jerome, 2004), image restoration (Benoit, 1995, 2000; Burns & Bruner, 2000; King, 2006), and post-crisis discourse (Coombs, 2004; Ulmer, Seeger & Sellnow, 2007), or specialised fields such as product-harm crises (Laufer, & Coombs, 2006; Siomkis, 1999).

With a strong practitioner presence in the literature, it is not surprising that practitioners as well as scholars have contributed to defining the field, and there have been numerous attempts to formulate a concise definition of crisis. These range from a rather unhelpful practitioner version "A crisis is any incident or situation, either real, rumored or alleged, that can focus negative attention on a company or organization internally, in the media or before key audiences" (Ruff & Aziz, 2003, p. 3) to the respected Fearn-Banks (1996, p. 1) who more specifically defined a crisis as "a major occurrence with a potentially negative outcome affecting an organization, company or industry as well as its publics, products, services or good name."

For the present discussion it is most helpful to turn to the widely-cited descriptive definition proposed by Pearson and Clair (1998): "an organizational crisis is a high impact event that threatens the viability of the organization and is characterized by ambiguity of cause, effect and means of resolution, as well as by a belief that decisions must be made swiftly" (p. 60).

In parallel with efforts to define a crisis, there has also been considerable scholarship devoted to identifying and categorizing different types of crises in the belief that such categorization can assist an organization in developing the most appropriate response strategies. Typical of this approach are Lerbinger (1997) who posited seven categories – crises from natural causes (disasters), technological crises, crises of malevolence, crises of skewed management values, crises of deception, crises of misconduct and confrontation crises; and Coombs (1999) who formulated five categories – misdeeds, accidents, malevolence, natural disaster and rumour. For their part, Hart and Boin (2001) proposed a typology of four patterns of crises – fast-burning, cathartic, slow burning and long shadow – while Gundel (2005) has explored in detail the role and properties of crisis typology.

Despite such differing language, and lack of exact agreement on crisis definitions and typologies, there is at least a reasonable level of commonality. However there is little commonality on what constitutes 'post-crisis'. Indeed, while there is a substantial body of research on various elements of post crisis response, there is no agreed definition

regarding the parameters of the post-crisis management phase, such as when a crisis 'ends', nor any agreement on the optimal management processes to be employed during this phase.

### **How to define 'post-crisis'**

The first challenge here is to properly understand what constitutes 'post-crisis.' One approach is to present the post-crisis phase as a period focused mainly on tactical response objectives. For example Coombs (2007) refers to post-crisis communication as what management say and do after a crisis, and he comments that much of the writing in this area consists of lists of what to do and what not to do, drawn from case studies. Heath and Millar (2004) describe post-crisis communication as providing information that "demonstrates how, why and when the organization has put things right as well as what it plans to do to prevent the recurrence of a similar crisis" (p. 8). They then specify four key management and communication tactics designed to restore control and bring closure.

In a similar vein, Reynolds and Seeger (2005) say post-crisis is most often characterized as a period of post-mortem, assessment, learning and constitution of new understandings of risk and risk avoidance. "In many instances post-crisis is also a period when the media and the public become more critical and questioning regarding the cause of the crisis, the appropriateness of responses and who would take the blame and responsibility" (p. 50).

By contrast to this largely responsive approach, there is also a more prospective view typified by Hart and Boin (2001) who refer to 'the crisis after the crisis,' where what is seen as the 'aftermath' may actually be the core of the crisis in political or institutional terms. This follows Phelps (1986) who had warned earlier "when the dust begins to settle, the aftershocks are often more devastating and costly to the organization over the long term than the original crisis" (p. 5). It was puzzling, he said, how so many CEO's and leaders failed to include disaster recovery planning and post-crisis management strategy as a major part of their overall goals, and he suggested that in thinking of crisis response, leaders seldom give thought to the longer term effect on the organization.

Turning to more specific detail, while the extant post-crisis communication research has been described as often disjointed and theoretical (Coombs, 2007), with an over promotion of apology as "the" response (Coombs & Holloday, 2008), emphasis on one area which has demonstrated a fair degree of agreement is what has been labeled 'post-crisis discourse.' Some leading scholars in this field have argued that the dominant paradigm for crisis communication has been image restoration and its various iterations (Ulmer, Seeger & Sellnow, 2007). In support of this contention, they and others have formulated two linked but distinct concepts – post-crisis discourse, which looks back to explain and justify past actions, and the post-crisis discourse of renewal, where there is a future focus on how crisis-induced limitations can be overcome and what new

opportunities can be explored (see also Coombs, 2004; Seeger, Ulmer, Novak & Sellnow, 2005; Ulmer & Sellnow, 2002).

In defining the latter concept, Ulmer et al. (2007) said the discourse of renewal extends past image restoration to a post-crisis innovation and adaptation of the organization. They said that, grounded in the larger framework of organizational rhetoric, the renewal model focuses on the provisional response of organizational leaders to devastating disasters, such as fire and floods, and the leaders' natural impulse to rebuild and move beyond the crisis.

It is this concept of management strategy beyond crisis response which lies at the heart of the current dilemma. At least part of the problem derives from the difficulty of assessing when a crisis 'ends'. This conundrum was colorfully expressed by Darling (1994): "The light of resolution the manager begins to see at the end of one crisis tunnel may very well be the prodromal light of an oncoming crisis. That would be bad enough if it weren't also for the acute whistle of another crisis sneaking up behind the manager in the same tunnel" (p. 7). He said the crisis cycle often makes it difficult to see where one crisis ends and another begins, especially in situations where the ripple effect complications of one crisis set off other crises within the organization.

One way through this challenge is to take a more holistic view of the continuum of crisis activity. Penrose (2000) was one of the early scholars presenting pre- and post-crisis management as an integrated whole. "In the past, pre- and post-crisis actions have not been consolidated as one, integrated unit. However .... these activities do cluster together and should be considered as an aggregate rather than as separate sets of activities. Proactive crisis management naturally affects recovery measures a company must use and is a vital strategy in mitigating the negative effects of crises. Proactive planning is also critical in capitalizing on opportunities provided by a crisis before one occurs. However the relationship between pre- and post-crisis activities places equal importance on recovery as on proactive action" (p. 166). Penrose said an organization which does not evaluate its crisis management strategy after a crisis will be little better prepared to manage the next crisis. Referring to the perceived close correlation between pre- and post-crisis activities, he concluded that an organization which recognizes the dual nature of a crisis will have a greater propensity for proactive planning and recovery, which in turn leads to more effective crisis management.

### **Existing approaches to crisis management**

In order to fully consider this holistic approach, and its implications for conceptualizing longer term post-crisis issues, it is necessary to first examine some of the prevailing crisis management models and the relationship between the constituent elements of the integrated whole. There are two divergent forces in the representation of the crisis management process which tend to blur the nature and extent of the longer term post-crisis environment and also blur the role of different management activities – namely the linear and non-linear approaches.

As recently as 2006 Falkheimer and Heide concluded that “the majority of the research in crisis communication has had a focus on guidelines and procedures, often gathered from the experience of practitioners, rather than on a more theoretical perspective” (p. 182). This practitioner approach has a distinct tendency towards a sequential, tactical conception of crisis management. Much of the literature is in fact firmly grounded in this linear approach, with a strong emphasis on tactical steps designed to move as rapidly as possible through the sequence towards the resolution/restoration phase (for example Burnett, 1988; Littlejohn, 1983; Seymour & Moore, 2000).

The crisis management pioneer Fink (1986) defined four crisis stages – prodromal, acute, chronic and resolution – which were innovative at the time and became a template for subsequent linear models (see for example Hale, Dulek & Hale, 2005). Yet Fink illustrated his own model with the four stages represented in a circular format, with crisis resolution looping through a dotted line back to the prodromal stage (p. 26). Indeed, Fink went even further and showed a second representation (p. 27) in which all four stages appear together, duplicated again and again in a repeated cycle.

The concept of crisis management as a cyclical construct has been explored a number of times, although none of these constructs has gained broad acceptance. Carty (2003), for example, theorized that an issue can be likened to a coil, which starts from the centre and spirals out in ever-widening loops as the organization or the public goes through successive stages, while Horsley and Barker (2002) developed a simpler construct they called a synthesis model of crisis communication, with six phases in a continuous loop.

Hale et al. (2005) developed this further with a spiral model, in which the process progresses forward through a loop from observation through dissemination, triggering in turn another response iteration. Described as “both cyclical and linear within a single iteration through the cycle” (p. 130) their model has a linear element which depicts the observation, interpretation, choice and dissemination communication steps as distinct activities which rely on a prior step’s completion, while the cyclical phase conveys a set of responsive iterative actions which build on and correct preceding iterations to progress towards the goal of crisis response.

Whereas these and similar cyclical approaches effectively focus on crisis response, Smith and Sipika (1993) earlier recognized that contingency planning alone is not enough to contend with the range of pressures affecting organizations in the post-crisis event period. Building on the important 1986 Fink phased approach, they developed a more comprehensive model to achieve what they call post-crisis turnaround – comprising a defensive phase (including control of the media and divestment); consolidation phase (including compensating victims, financial restructuring and market calming); and an offensive phase (including review of management, change of personnel, marketing and acquisition) – with each phase overlapping and recycling back through the options. In the same way, Coombs (1999) has written extensively about crisis management as an *ongoing* process, and proposes that although the organization may be to normal

operations, the post-crisis phase still comprises three sub-phases – follow-up communication, cooperation with investigations, and crisis tracking.

However, even such advanced analysis is largely confined to the elements within crisis management as conventionally defined, rather than presenting a fully holistic framework within the broader continuum of management activity. It is the holistic approach to crisis management which makes it possible to better distinguish the different post-crisis impacts, including longer term issues.

### **Long term post-crisis impacts**

Jaques (2007) formulated an integrated, cross-discipline model, positioning both issue management and crisis management within a joint relational cycle. Predicated upon avoiding an over-reliance on specific definitions, this model presents crisis management conceptually as “a continuous discipline based on clusters and non-linear elements” (p. 150) with the post-crisis phase comprising three separate clusters of activities - namely recovery/business resumption, evaluation/modification and post-crisis issue impacts. The first of these – recovery/business resumption – includes concepts such as operational recovery, market retention, business momentum and share price protection, which are well developed in the literature (for example Dowdell, Govindaraj & Jain, 1992; Knight & Pretty, 1999; O’Rourke, 2006; Seeger et al., 2005).

Of course post-crisis recovery is not just about getting back to work, but should also involve the management learning phases of evaluation and process modification, specifically what could have been done differently and what was learned to reduce the chance of this happening again. The elements of the evaluation and modification cluster – which include root cause analysis, process review and implementation of change – have also been extensively researched. For example Stern (1997) and Elliott, Smith and McGuinness (2000) have detailed the barriers to learning after a crisis. Furthermore, this cluster strongly reinforces the cyclical nature of crisis management, feeding directly back into the planning/preparedness element. This post-crisis phase has been described as representing “an opportunity to change those aspects of the organization which helped create the potential for crisis in the first place” (Elliott et al. 2000, p. 21), or “a privileged moment during which to understand things differently” (Roux-Dufort 2000, p. 26).

However a simple loop back into the short term process does not adequately provide for the third critical cluster of activities – namely post-crisis issue impacts. There is extensive literature on managing some of the judicial post-crisis issue impacts – such as coronial inquests, committees of inquiry, prosecution and litigation – with much of that based on case studies (for example Howell & Miller, 2006; Jacobs & Boin, 2001; Resodihardjo, 2006; Vaughan, 1996; Wicks, 2001) rather than on a developed theoretical framework.

It is the concept of longer term post-crisis issue impacts where there is a clear gap in research, and one of the hurdles is the absence of any agreed taxonomy to capture this

important area. Yet issues which become manifest after the crisis event *can* represent an even greater risk to the organization and its reputation.

The prolonged impact of crises is undoubted. Research in the United States and Europe showed 80% of companies which lacked a well conceived and tested contingency plan go out of business within two years of suffering a major disaster (Brown, 1993). And a more recent study of Australian corporate crises over a decade found that 25% did not survive the event (Coleman, 2004). Analysis of case studies makes it clear that this fatal impact often derives not from the crisis event itself but from the longer term corporate failure to manage the post-crisis issues, as shown in high profile examples such as the end of Pan Am in the wake of the 1988 Lockerbie air disaster; the hostile takeover of Perrier after its 1990 benzene contamination crisis; and the demise of Arthur Anderson after the 2001 Enron collapse.

This leads to the central question, namely to what extent could more effective definition and management of longer term post-crisis issue impacts improve reputation restoration and help reduce the risk of post-crisis demise.

### **Issue Management and Crisis Management**

It has been said that the best way to manage crises is to understand and manage issues, and contemporaneous with the crisis management debate between a linear and non-linear approach, issue management too has addressed a similar dichotomy. In the case of issue management the development and promotion of life cycle models (Bigelow, Fahey & Mahon, 1993; Femers, Klewes & Lintemeier, 2000; Mahon & Waddock, 1992; Zyglidopoulos, 2003) has reinforced the concept that some problems left unaddressed trend towards increasing seriousness and greater risk, with matters of contention typically depicted moving progressively along a sequence from concern to problem to issue to crisis, and then to some form of resolution.

It is a key weakness (and an ironic misnomer) that most models illustrating the issue life cycle are not cyclical but linear. This linearity naturally suggests that such activities take place in a sequential fashion, when in reality issue management is inherently not a linear process. As Bigelow et al. (1993) concluded: "Issues do not necessarily follow a linear, sequential path, but instead follow paths that reflect the intensity and diversity of the values and interests stakeholders bring to an issue and the complexity of the interaction among the ... factors" (p. 54). Similarly, Lamertz, Martens and Heugens (2003) also found that issues often fail to progress along predictable lines, and deviate frequently from the linear, sequential path.

The other principal weakness of the linear life cycle is that – despite issue management having distinct proactive and reactive modes – it encourages the perception of issue management largely as crisis avoidance, leading to the notion that a crisis can be properly characterized as a 'failure' of issue management. (Regester and Larkin, 2005, captured this in the maxim 'An issue ignored is a crisis ensured.')

As a result issue management is commonly positioned firmly in the pre-crisis or crisis prevention mode.

The contrary viewpoint is exemplified by Heath (1997) who argues persuasively for going beyond the traditional problem-issue-crisis-resolution linear sequence, suggesting the critical concept that not only can crises arise from issues, but that issues can arise from crises. “Crisis management and issue management are linked. Some crises have the potential for becoming issues if they create or add to a key public’s sense that a problem exists that needs public policy remedy. Some issues may become crises as key publics press organizations and industries to achieve higher standards of performance. In rare cases the issue can threaten the existence of the company or industry, as is the case of the anti-tobacco critics’ efforts to destroy the tobacco industry” (p. 289). He warned that a crisis can become an issue when the offending organization seems unable or unwilling to exert sufficient control to create and maintain the mutually beneficial relationships its stakeholders expect. Heath subsequently concluded that an issue, can “either result from a crisis/risk combination or lead to such occurrence” (2006, p. 245).

To illustrate this broader relationship, the much-analyzed *Exxon Valdez* disaster can be seen first as an environmental crisis (a major oil spill); then a management crisis (slow and inadequate response); then a management/litigation issue (sustained legal and public review of management response) and finally a persistent reputational issue which may never fade.

A similar high profile example is the 1984 Bhopal chemical leak, in the wake of which Union Carbide's stock value fell by \$US900 million and the embattled company faced a very costly hostile takeover bid by GAF (Smith & Sipika, 1993). The corporate predators eventually withdrew, but the defensive effort left UCC with a massive debt load, which forced major divestment and financial restructuring. In 1999 a smaller and weaker UCC had little choice but to become a wholly owned subsidiary of The Dow Chemical Company. When the transaction was completed in February 2001 the crisis legacy from Bhopal became in turn a prolonged and damaging activist and perception issue for Dow.

Other examples include the Three Mile Island reactor incident of 1979, which cause no great immediate environmental damage, but led to a major issue creating lasting damage to the entire nuclear power industry; and the Enron crisis of 2001, which triggered a worldwide issue for corporate governance and accounting practice.

It is this reconceptualization of the relationship between crisis management and issue management which brings us back to the core challenge of how to define and manage longer term issue impacts.

### **Practical application of Issue Management post-crisis**

Post-crisis issues can exist in different forms. As Heath put it: “A crisis can be an event that creates an issue or keeps an issue alive or gives it strength” (1997, p. 289). The most easily understood form is managing the response to a fresh issue which arises from a crisis, most commonly for an individual organization, such as the aftermath of the Challenger disaster of 1986 which led to a prolonged reputational issue for NASA. It can

also impact on an entire industry, such as the accelerated introduction of tamper-evident pharmaceutical packaging in the wake of the Tylenol crisis, or the demand for double-hull construction of ocean-going tankers after the *Exxon Valdez* disaster.

The less common post-crisis issue impact is where a crisis situation reverts to the previous trigger issue, sometimes in a modified or evolved form, recognizing that the life cycle of a complex issue can move through the crisis phase and back to issue status. The dramatic swings in the tobacco issue over many decades provide a highly public example of such an issue (Pratt, 2001). A less well known case is cited by Washington veteran Mark Schannon (2006) who described the Greenpeace campaign against the chemical chlorine in the early 1990s, which escalated from issue to crisis with the high profile intervention of the USEPA and the publication of a controversial activist book, then dropped off the radar of public and mainstream media because there was no ongoing receptivity to the issue. “Within a few months,” he said, “those of us working on the issue literally woke up one morning and realized that something bizarre had happened. The crisis had devolved back into an issue, but none of us had anticipated or recognized it until after the fact” (p. 11).

Addressing the research questions which arise in this respect, Heath (2004) says the relationship between issues and crises needs further clarification. “What conditions lead an issue to become a crisis? Likewise, what elements of crisis result in its becoming an issue?” (p. 249).

Existing scholarship provides other examples of the transition between the two concepts, mainly based on case studies, yet offers little guidance on the appropriate management tools to most effectively address this transition. The proposal here is that issue management provides a proven process, regardless of which type of post-crisis issue impact is involved. The core steps of issue management – recognition, strategy development, implementation and evaluation – which can be so effective in the pre-crisis or crisis prevention mode, have equal application post-crisis, especially with regard to issue recognition. In the aftermath of a crisis, the nature of any consequential issue may be self-evident, but proper recognition, analysis and prioritization, as provided within issue management best practice, is no less critical. At a time when blame and opportunity responses might be the main focus, and when the natural desire is to move on (see for example Elliott et al. 2000) management may be unwilling or unable to make a more objective judgment about the ongoing risk to the organization, and about the need to initiate an entirely different management process. In this way, formal issue management can enable the organization or industry to move beyond the conventional defensive processes, normally associated with post-crisis response and recovery, in order to take a planned strategic approach to the longer term issue.

Accepting issue management as an optimal tool to address post-crisis issues, there is an clear need to research and rethink the prevailing issue management models. Most start with a problem, which has the potential to escalate in a linear fashion into a full-blown issue and perhaps grow into a crisis. However, the conventional lifecycle does not

naturally lend itself to assuming a crisis not as the end point of the cycle but as its starting point, which in turn reinforces the utility of an integrated, non-linear construct.

Similarly, crisis management faces a hurdle when management scholars and practitioners pursue a defined 'resolution' instead of recognizing the ongoing nature of some crises and the potential for longer term issue impacts. Given that the end point of a crisis is sometimes not resolution but a fresh or renewed issue, organizations which fail to manage the transition beyond conventional crisis response face a real risk without proper processes for longer term management of post-crisis issues.

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