Crisis leadership: a view from the executive suite

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Citation: Journal of Public Affairs, 2012, 12 (4) pp 366-372

Abstract:

Crisis leadership has become a strong element of crisis management scholarship, yet much of the published research is primarily observational, based on the performance of leaders in crisis situations or prescriptions for preferred behaviour. By contrast, this paper builds on in-depth interviews with CEOs and top executives who provide a rare and remarkably frank view from the executive suite about the current state of crisis management and in particular about the role of corporate leaders in crisis prevention and preparedness. The heavily regulated chemical industry is seen as something of a bellwether for crisis management and the paper details the perspective from leaders themselves, namely top executives in the chemical and petrochemical industry in Australia, representing some of the world's largest multinational corporations. The paper explores the reasons perceived at the executive level for why top executives often fail to provide the necessary openness, leadership and prioritization to prevent and prepare for organizational crises.

Text

Crisis leadership has become a strong element of crisis management scholarship, yet much of the published research is primarily observational, based on the performance of leaders in crisis situations or prescriptions for preferred behaviour.

Similarly, much of the broader crisis management literature remains highly process-driven and tactical, with a strong emphasis on the 'how to' of getting ready for a crisis and what to do when it strikes. This paper provides a more strategic management perspective, looking specifically at the leadership role in the bellwether chemical and petrochemical sector.

Although it has been calculated that perhaps 90% of the crisis management literature focuses primarily on tactical response (Pauchant and Mitroff, 1992) even the most superficial treatments identify the importance of leadership in crisis response. This has led to an increasing examination of crisis leadership in both academic and practitioner publications.

Broadly, examination of crisis leadership has tended to fall into some well-established categories –

- leadership qualities in crisis response (Boin and 't Hart, 2003; Klann, 2003; James and Wooten, 2005; Garcia, 2006; Rowe, 2008; Wooten and James, 2008);
- the closely related field of the leader as crisis communicator/spokesperson (Kozacik, 2003; Farmer and Tvedt, 2005; Cole and Fellows, 2008; Lucero, Kwang and Pang 2009; Oliveira and Murphy, 2009; Levick, 2010);
- the leader in post crisis sense making and recovery (Coombs, 2000; Seeger, 2001; Heath, 2004; Seeger, Ulmer, Novak and Sellnow, 2005; Hearit, 2006; Jaques, 2009) and, sadly;
- continuing focus on the leader as the actual cause of crises (Seeger and Ulmer, 2003: O'Rourke, 2004; Zahram, Priem and Rasheed, 2007; Wade, Pollock, Porac and Graffin, 2008; Black, 2009, Dubrovski, 2009).

Beyond these largely responsive (albeit critically important) roles, the emergence of the process approach to crisis management has focussed increasing attention on crisis leadership in the management phases prior to the triggering event. This in turn has broadened the perceived leadership role far beyond crisis response and crisis communication.

The process approach to crisis management

The process approach to crisis management builds on the concept of crisis incubation, that "crises evolve within organizations, they do not simply appear, and they are not divorced from the actions of those managers who may ultimately be required to deal with the management of such events" (Smith, 2004, p. 350).

An American pioneer of the process approach to crisis management concluded that "crises are not events, but processes extended in time and place" (Shrivastava, 1995, p. 2) and this concept was soon adopted by European academics who concurred that crises are "not discrete events, but rather high intensity nodes in ongoing streams of social interaction" ('t Hart et al, 2001, p. 185).

This was further developed and aptly characterized by Roux-Dufort (2007) who described a crisis as "an accumulation of organizational imperfections." He warned that while the event approach sees the triggering event as the crisis, the process approach sees it only as the amplifier for a process which started long before. (For further discussion of the event vs process approach, see Forgues and Roux-Dufort, 1998; Jaques, 2010).

Moreover, it is this process approach, recognising that crisis management should include systematic attempts to prevent crises from occurring in the first place, which in turn has reemphasised the need to better understand the roles and attitudes of leaders in the pre-crisis phase. As Harvard Professor John Kotter has commented: "Conducting business as usual is very difficult if the building seems to be on fire. But in an increasingly fast-moving world, waiting for the fire to breakout is a dubious strategy" (cited in Weiss, 2002, p. 28).

While many tactical aspects of crisis preparedness and crisis response are typically delegated to operational managers, it is clear that strategic activities such as early problem identification, risk assessment, issue management and resource allocation require the direct involvement or imprimatur of top management to achieve successful crisis prevention. But all of this work is predicated on the capacity of management to identify the red flags or warning signs which precede most organizational crises (Mitroff, 2002), and the effectiveness of preventive action to reduce the likelihood or impact of future adverse events.

Many writers have explored the so-called inevitability of crises – the idea that crises will happen, you just don't know when. Some of this analysis evolved from the early work of Turner (1976) who introduced the idea of predictability and developed the concept of pre-crisis incubation.

This was later reinforced by a concept of 'normal accidents,' coined by sociologist Charles Perrow (1984), which promoted further attention to the role of leaders in the pre-crisis phase. While Perrow's work is sometimes cited as a general theory about the inevitability of organizational crises, his focus was specifically on high technology or high reliability industrial systems. He argued that the tight coupling and complex interactions of such systems mean faults which may be tolerable individually allow little option for mitigation or defence and lead inevitably to serious or even catastrophic failures.

Perrow reportedly felt some people later misinterpreted his concept as implying that organizations need simply to accept as 'normal' the inevitability of catastrophic risks in technological systems. A more accurate conclusion for broader management would be the need for crisis prevention to focus not on individuals and isolated problems, but on organizations and systems as a whole. In other words, the proposition that accidents can be reduced or prevented through good organizational design and management.

Perrow's work is particularly pertinent to the present study, as his theory was developed across high technology/high reliability industries such as nuclear power, chemical manufacturing and oil refining.

In line with the context established by Perrow, one of the most comprehensive studies of crisis management attitudes in the high-reliability sector of business was the work done by Kovoor-Misra who interviewed 183 people in nine major American corporations – a public utility, an aerospace company, and seven chemical manufacturers (Kovoor-Misra, 1996; Kovoor-Misra, Zammuto and Mitroff, 2000). However only 14 of the interview subjects were classified by the researchers as being 'top management' – defined as CEO, COO, Heads of business groups and divisions.

In terms of crisis preparedness, two of the key findings from this American study were that all nine organizations systematically used elaborate safety systems to prevent dysfunction in technical sub-systems, but none addressed the causes of crises in other sub-systems; and that signal detection systems were instituted in technical areas, but not in non-technical areas.

This discrepancy between the prescriptive literature on crisis management and how organizations actually prepare for crises can also be seen in the terminology developed by

Schannon (2006) to distinguish between *operational preparedness* – plans to contain the problem and quickly get back to normal – and *organizational preparedness*, which Schannon described as primarily about the creation of a ‘crisis mindset’ among those in charge.

An important earlier study in the field of crisis preparedness was the work of Mitroff and Pauchant (1990) based on over 350 interviews with ‘top management’ in more than 120 companies across a wide range of industry sectors. In that case the subjects were not CEO’s, but “the top individual in the organizations directly concerned with overseeing crisis management” (p. 84). Indeed, the authors explicitly stated that in many cases the interviewees disagreed strongly with the views of their supervisors in areas such as crisis preparedness and organizational culture.

By contrast with both of these studies, the focus of the present research is exclusively on the senior executive perspective within Australian corporations in the field of chemicals and petrochemicals, all of them part of multinational organizations. [1] One executive was interviewed from each of the 12 companies, with all being either Managing Director or General Manager, or in one case a Divisional Director.[2]

All but one of the interviews were conducted face to face. The respondents were also asked to complete a brief quantitative survey, which was implemented immediately prior to the interview to ensure answers were not coloured by subsequent discussion. All interviews were recorded, with the transcript reviewed by the participant to ensure accuracy and to avoid any inadvertent identifying detail. Many described their own personal involvement in crisis situations, but “off the record” in order to ensure preserving anonymity.

The role of crisis leadership

A key challenge here is the paucity of empirical research into crisis leadership. In fact Schoenberg (2005) described crisis leadership as one of the most important yet least studied factors in crisis management. In the same vein, Wooten and James (2008) lamented that, although prior crisis management research has described how crises unfold across various phases, “there is virtually no research that identifies the knowledge, skills or abilities necessary to lead an organization through these phases’ (p. 372).

In this respect, an early conclusion by Pauchant and Mitroff (1992) was that “the involvement of top managers is absolutely essential for developing a systemic strategy in crisis management and convincing others in the organization to co-operate” (p. 130). Yet their seminal study of top managers in major organizations in the US, Canada and France found at the same time that 50% of the managers interviewed still saw crisis management as a mostly technical issue and that the same proportion “considered crisis management efforts to be reactive in nature, to be applied strictly for the purpose of returning to ‘business and usual’ as soon as possible” (p. 198).

[1] In total, the companies represented had 10,600 employees, operated 133 plant sites across Australia and had local annual sales amounting to $13.3 billion (AUD).

[2] For brevity the term CEO will be used to describe the group of interviewees

Adding to this concern, Wooten and James felt that theoretical development of the crisis management field is too much centred on communication strategies and frameworks. “Viewing crisis management only through a communication lens,” they said, “undermines other important leadership responsibilities” (2008, p. 353).

A number of authors have itemised what they believe are the roles and responsibilities of an effective crisis leader. For example, Boin, ‘t Hart, Stern and Sundelius (2005) suggested five crucial tasks for leadership – sense making of the crisis; making decisions to deal with it; framing and making meaning of the crisis to stakeholders; terminating the crisis to restore normalcy; and steering the organization to learn from the crisis. For their part James and Wooten (2005) identified six core leadership competencies – building a foundation of trust; creating a new corporate mindset; identifying the (not so) obvious organizational vulnerabilities; making wise and rapid decisions; taking courageous action; and learning from the crisis to effect change.

While there are some elements of commonality between these and similar lists, James and Wooten pointed out: “The best organizational crisis leadership is generally not evident, because these firms are less likely to experience a crisis, and when a crisis does occur they are managed in such a way that the sensationalism of the crisis is weakened” (2005, p. 150).

Partly to counter this concern, the present research offers a perspective specifically from corporate leaders themselves.

Research findings

To some degree reflecting the competencies listed above, the CEOs in their survey responses and interviews identified a variety of leadership roles in crisis management, including preparedness and prevention. From analysis of this research material, these identified leadership roles can be categorized under eight broad headings (which should not be taken as assuming any order of priority).

(1) Encourage a proactive crisis culture
(2) Establish and enforce standards and processes
(3) Prioritise and set an example
(4) Properly assess the full range of risks
(5) Promote open upward communication
(6) Build relationships before the crisis
(7) Be ready to deal with the news media
(8) Encourage a learning environment and share experience

(1) Encourage a proactive crisis culture

The CEOs interviewed all had a positive and proactive view of the role of the CEO. They were very conscious of the risk of denial – “it won’t happen to me” – and the risk created by prioritising other seemingly more important tasks. As one CEO put it:

> “People prioritize based on day-to-day issues and pressures. And, hopefully, on more than 99% of days, crisis management is not an issue or priority.

> Consequently, I think there is a tendency for people to put it off. When it's time to do the crisis management stuff, there is always something else which is more important in the short term. It's a matter of planning and priority setting and leadership."

At the same time they expressed commitment to the personal role of top managers. When asked which function should have the lead role in managing crisis management 50% named the office of CEO/MD. Only 17% assigned that lead role of Public/Corporate Affairs (see table A)

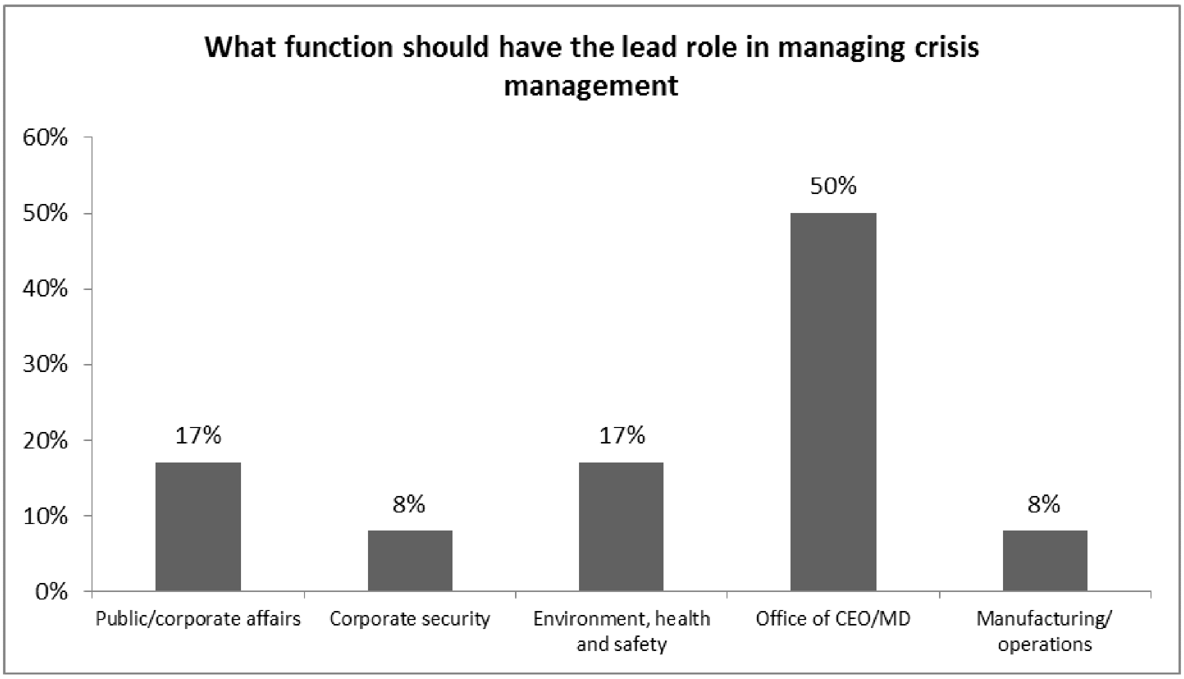

Table A. What function has the lead role

When asked about the role of the CEO in their own company in terms of planning crisis management, 42% said the CEO was personally involved or led executive planning and a further 50% said the CEO participated in exercises. In only one company was the CEO reported to have no personal involvement in the crisis management process.

(2) Establish and enforce standards and processes

Given that the interviewees were all from large multinational companies, there was a predictable consensus on the value of standards and processes, although there was also a recognition that process alone is of limited value without enforcement and auditing and regular training. One CEO concluded

> "I think perhaps it is seen as a dry process. It's not particularly exciting, it's not about growth, it's not about selling. It's seen as something which is a cost, which you have to do to fob off the auditors each year, to get through the audit process, without contemplating what that potentially means."

Somewhat less predictable was the finding of a distinct divide between the CEOs who appeared to rely very heavily on the effectiveness of systems and process, and those who felt that no amount of process will provide a sufficient safeguard without strong leadership and personal skills.

Another clear finding was the perspective of the CEOs about the implementation of adequate process in other smaller or more local organizations. It was a common theme that while large multinational organizations such as their own had the resources and experience and exposure to put processes, procedures and policies in place, the same did not necessarily apply elsewhere. One CEO commented: "If you were to go outside of our industry, I don't think you would find that rigidity of risk management with other industries." Another went even further: "For the vast majority of Australian companies, which are small to medium, I would say no, they don't put enough effort into crisis prevention."

(3) Prioritize and set an example

Another common theme was the role of the CEO in driving effective prioritization of effort and setting a personal example. One said:

> "If leadership from the very top of the organization doesn't give adequate focus to crisis management then why would you expect that layers of leadership further down the organization would give it adequate focus? But I don't see this as a barrier. It's simply a matter of making the time and doing it."

Referring to setting the proper culture, one respondent described the importance of what he called "trying to drive awareness and attitude into people." For example, he said, it was insufficient to simply say that it was not accepted to bully the young apprentice in the workplace.

> "You have to make sure it doesn't happen. Everyone will say it's not acceptable and then turn a blind eye when the young apprentice is given a hard time. Management has to drive that, to set the example, to drive what behaviour, what attitude is expected."

But when it came to undertaking regular crisis management training, the CEOs recognised that it was not easy to achieve. In fact only half of the CEOs said their organization had a system in place and exercised it regularly. One CEO admitted that getting people together on a particular day to do a simulation was "like pulling teeth." And, he added, "that's in an organization like ours, where it's non-negotiable. So what it is like in an organization where the attitude is 'if you get time' or 'if you see it as a priority, please do it'?"

Another executive was equally frank about the challenge of getting top management to focus on crisis prevention.

> "I don't think there's an outright resistance to focus on crisis prevention. You have a discussion with the CEO or the COO and they agree 'yes, we should do that.' But when I get my group together, their eyes glaze over. It's not sexy. It's not interesting."

(4) Properly assess the full range of risks

The link between crisis prevention and effective risk assessment was a common theme among the respondents, who particularly mentioned the need for the CEO to ensure proper assessment of risks beyond the obvious and also the need to avoid an excessively internal perspective. As one put it:

> "We don't think broadly enough about scenarios. I don't think there is a lot of analysis of the risk of it happening versus the impact, and looking at different things other than what might traditionally jump into your mind. For a chemical company, for example, you might think about things blowing up, that's going to be our crisis, but it's far from that."

Another concluded:

> "In my experience risk management is an entrenched process and you are relying on the executive to identify, raise, log and prioritise risks as they see fit. So it is important that the process is in place, and it is then reliant upon the executive to raise the appropriate things. It is a management role to raise it and say it is important."

However, the difficulty of thinking broadly was reflected by the CEOs themselves when asked to prioritize nine potential crisis risks. Despite data from the Institute for Crisis Management [3] showing that the majority of crisis are smouldering issues caused by management and mismanagement rather than being sudden unexpected events, the survey data from the CEOs still revealed a high priority for operational events such as spills and leaks, transportation accidents and environmental damage (Table B)

Rank as potential crisis risks to your company	Average total	Median ranking
Transportation incidents	3.08	1
Onsite spills, leaks, fires	3.25	2
Environmental damage	3.33	3
High profile litigation/law suits	3.75	4
Product failure/recall	4.66	5

[3] www.crisisexperts.org

New Government regulation	5.91	6
Employee misbehaviour	6.66	7
Financial mismanagement	7.08	8
Natural disasters	7.33	9

Table B. Ranking potential crises

(5) Promote open upward communication

The need for open upward communication was seen by the interviewees as critical to crisis prevention. Moreover, this was seen as a responsibility of top management and it was often described in terms of establishing an appropriate culture. One CEO summarised this view when he said:

> "Training, having policies in place, the training associated with those, having the right culture in place is very important. A culture where you don't shoot messengers, a culture where you are prepared to accept things said to you, and then go and find the facts. A culture which is inclusive rather than burying your head in the sand and hope things don't happen."

When interviewed, the CEO's frequently used current crisis examples from the headlines to make their point. One commented:

> "We have plenty of examples of corporations burning their reputations because they bury things. We actively discourage that, and we actually encourage disclosure, because on that basis you've got some chance of managing it. . . . It's a climate issue, a trust issue, it's about the way in which we expect people to respond, even to bad news."

(6) Build relationships before the crisis

Closely linked to promoting open communication is the role of the leader in building relationships before the crisis. And here too, trust is an essential ingredient.

Schoenberg (2005) says "The success of a crisis leader is measured in terms of his or her ability to influence or motivate key audiences toward a specific behaviour or belief," adding that trust between internal and external audiences is the key measure sought by communicators and business leaders alike (p. 3). Similarly, James and Wooten (2005) argue that the best crisis leaders are those who build a foundation of trust within the organization and through the organization's systems, and use that foundation when crises occur.

One of the interviewees had a very practical perspective on this role.

> "You need to have a map of your stakeholders who, in the event of something good happening you want to impress, and in the event of something bad happening you want to win over to see your side of the argument. So it's a matter of mapping out who are the people who really count and having active programmes in place to go out and build those relationships."

Several of the CEOs also described in detail the importance of building an effective pre-crisis relationship with the Board. One CEO commented: "Boards are not just there to sit around. They are there to show oversight." Another added: "It sits with the Board, and probably with the Chairman and non-executive Directors, to recognise signs of any potential crisis and act on it."

Nadler (2006) closely examined the board relationship and concluded:

> "There is an implicit assumption that crisis management is all about the CEO donning a Superman cape and single-handedly defending the corporation. That view was always simplistic and in today's world, it's irrelevant . . . Empowered boards and smart CEOs are coming to realise that boards have such an important role to play, not just when a crisis erupts, but during the preparation and recovery stages as well" (p. 194)

(7) Be ready to deal with the news media

The role of the CEO as crisis spokesperson has been very well examined in the literature (see references above) and was largely taken as given by the study interviewees. However several expressed concern about the lack of preparedness and training to deal properly with the news media.

One said he was conscious when watching the news that companies seemed ill-prepared to deal with reporters, and another said it appeared from stories in the newspapers that companies were often 'doing the right thing', but handling the media badly and damaging their reputation.

Another CEO believed Australian executives were often far too willing to 'wing it'. "I see media training as a bit like going to the gym. You can't just go once and say 'I've done it now.' You've got to do it on a regular basis. Otherwise the skills disappear."

(8) Encourage a learning environment and share experience

Like media response, post-crisis learning has been very extensively researched, with a focus on the barriers to organizations learning both from their own crisis and crisis which have struck others (Lagadec, 1997; Stern, 1997; Roux-Dufort, 2000; Smith and Elliott, 2007; Jaques, 2008).

However, the CEOs interviewed took a broader perspective on the role of the CEO in encouraging and actively pursuing a learning environment within the organization, and also the capacity of CEOs to participate in peer-to-peer sharing about crises. Specifically they identified an unwillingness of CEOs to share crisis experience with executives from other companies, or a lack of opportunity to do so. They recognised a variety of reasons for this reluctance – including embarrassment and legal and structural constraints – but they also expressed support for better sharing, and believed CEOs had a role to overcome these barriers in the interests of both company and industry improvement.

Several CEOs described how they assembled key people to do a case study of any incidents which had been reported recently in the news media, and also how they shared internal crises or near misses across their organization globally to improve learning and awareness.

Yet, there was also a recognition that learning is limited and generally unstructured. "We find ourselves dealing with crises from time to time to varying extents," one CEO reported. "And there is always the case for learning from past events, learning from the incident and how it was managed. I think that's the key, that the process of learning is embedded in the culture of the organization."

Conclusions:

While the crisis management literature is very wide and varied, the managers interviewed here provided a rare insight into the view from the executive suite. All were very experienced executives, most with decades of service in their respective companies, and many having personally experienced organizational crises.

While their specific opinions differed in some respects, eight common themes on the leadership role in crisis management were identified –which have been described in detail above – along with a common and determined acceptance of the role of the CEO/MD as a key player in setting and driving crisis leadership.

At a broader level, they were generally optimistic about the standard of crisis management in Australia and elsewhere, and about future improvement. Moreover, they were in unanimous agreement that the best form of crisis management is crisis prevention.

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