

A Panel Symposium Sample

Multi-Theoretical Perspectives in Crisis Management

Organizer:

Amy Guerber, University of Arkansas (Co-organizer; panelist)
Mike Pfarrer, University of Georgia (Co-organizer; moderator)

Participants:

Jonathan Bundy, University of Georgia (panelist)
Vikas Anand, University of Arkansas (panelist)
Timothy Coombs, University of Central Florida (panelist)
Sherry Holladay, University of Central Florida (panelist)
Nicole Gillespie, University of Queensland (panelist)
Matthew Kraatz, University of Illinois (panelist)
Ted Waldron, Baylor University (panelist)

Symposium Format and Flow

Segment	Time	Purpose
Introduction	5 minutes	Opening remarks, panel introductions, and brief review of core questions.
Core Questions	30 minutes	Discussion of core research questions presented above.
Synthesis & Audience Dialogue	35 minutes	Discussant synthesis of core ideas raised by panel and engagement with symposium audience.
Total Time:	75 minutes	

Keywords: Crisis management, perception management, social cognition

SYMPOSIUM OVERVIEW

Organizational crises are large-scale, negative events which threaten the goals of organizations and which can have profound effects on a variety of stakeholders. For this reason it is not surprising that practitioners and academics from a variety of disciplines and theoretical perspectives have devoted considerable attention to understanding organizational crises and crisis management. Crisis management research has addressed a number of important issues, such as understanding which types of crises can occur (Coombs & Holladay, 2002), which types of crisis management and response strategies may be adopted by managers (Coombs, 2007; Elsbach, 1984; Pearson & Clair, 1998), and how stakeholders' and managers' perceptions of a crisis shape strategic processes (Dutton, 1986). Crisis management research has also addressed a number of important organizational outcomes, including financial performance (Marcus & Goodman, 1991), reputational damage and repair (Coombs, 2007; Love & Kraatz, 2009), perceptions of trustworthiness (Gillespie & Dietz, 2009), legitimacy (Elsbach, 1994), reintegration with stakeholders (Pfarrer, DeCelles, Smith, & Taylor, 2008), and organizational survival (D'Aveni & MacMillan, 1990).

Despite considerable, sustained interest in organizational crises and crisis management, research in this area remains fragmented, and integration of various theoretical perspectives is limited. A recent review suggests that "we have only just begun to scratch the surface in our understanding" of crisis management processes and encourages further exploration and integration of the various streams and perspectives addressing the topic (Coombs, 2010: 479). Additionally, research in crisis management has been criticized for its lack of theoretical and empirical rigor, which may serve to weaken the crisis context as a viable stream of research (Coombs, 2007). Thus, the purpose of this panel symposium is to bring together academics from

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multiple theoretical perspectives who share an interest in crisis management research to address the “state of the field” and discuss future research directions. The panelists represent a variety of theoretical backgrounds, including public relations and communications, trust and trustworthiness, institutional and macro-organizational theory, stakeholder and social issues, business ethics, and socio-cognitive perspectives. The symposium will be organized around the discussion of three questions which are foundational to the future of crisis management research. In the remainder of this proposal we discuss the three core questions, provide a brief description of the symposium participants, present an outline of the proposed session format, and discuss the relevance of the symposium to the proposed division sponsors.

CORE QUESTIONS

1) How should we define an “organizational crisis”? What are the key elements on which we can all agree? Can we develop a nuanced and shared nomenclature that will allow us to more succinctly communicate about different types of crises across various disciplines and theoretical frameworks? What are the appropriate criteria on which crises can be categorized?

Existing definitions of organizational crises vary widely. Some researchers conceptualize organizational crises based on objective characteristics such as systemic disruption, threats to high-priority goals or organizational survival, and urgency (Marcus & Goodman, 1991; D’Aveni & MacMillan, 1990). Other researchers define crises based on managerial perceptions of the event (Hermann, 1972; Billings, Milburn, & Schaalman, 1980; Dutton, 1986), and still others define crises in terms of stakeholder perceptions (Pearson & Clair, 1998; Shrivastava, Mitroff, Miller, & Miglani, 1988; Hoffman & Ocasio, 2001; Gillespie & Dietz, 2009). Additionally, some definitions of a crisis include the element of surprise or suddenness (e.g., Hermann, 1972), while others suggest that crises develop gradually (Hwang & Lichtenthal, 2000).

Whereas some definitions of organizational crises may be more relevant to certain research questions than others, this lack of clarity has likely hindered the development of research in this area. For example, researchers who take an objective view of organizational crises are likely to encounter resistance from others who feel that recognizing managerial or stakeholder perceptions is a necessary first step. Typologies and taxonomies to distinguish crises based on various characteristics do exist (e.g., Coombs, 2007; Marcus & Goodman, 1991), but crisis management scholars have yet to develop a common definition and shared nomenclature. By bringing together researchers from various theoretical perspectives, we hope to move towards a consistent definition and nomenclature that will allow increased integration of various perspectives.

2) How can we move towards a stronger and more comprehensive theory of crisis management?

How can we integrate theories from across disciplines?

Scholars have approached crisis management from a number of theoretical perspectives. For example, research in communications and public relations draws from theories of rhetoric and attributions (e.g., Coombs, 2010). Research at the inter-personal level generally focuses on trust and trustworthiness, the emotional reactions elicited by a crisis, and the implications of a crisis on organizational leadership (e.g., Gillespie & Dietz, 2009; James, Wooten, & Dushek, 2011). Researchers at the macro-level draw from a number of organizational theories, including stakeholder theory, institutional theory, and socio-cognitive theories related to reputation and other social evaluations (e.g., Love & Kraatz, 2009; Pfarrer et al., 2008). Additionally, each perspective concentrates on various components of a crisis, including the nature of the crisis, the nature of the communication strategy employed, the nature an organization's prior relationships with stakeholders, etc.

Our panel will consider the value of integrating these various perspectives into a comprehensive theory of crisis management. Additionally, the panelists will also consider how the various perspectives compliment and/or conflict with one another. Ultimately, we seek to discover paths for integration and seek to encourage cross-disciplinary dialogue in order to better understand crises, crisis management, and stakeholder relations.

3) How can crisis management research provide value to managers and practitioners? What are our responsibilities to the academy and society as crisis management researchers? What do we do when we observe results that are counter to what we would “like to see”?

Organizational crises can have severe consequences for organizations, stakeholders, and society at large, research in this area can inform a very important aspect of organizational activity. Thus, conducting high-quality research and translating the results into prescriptions for practice is an important aim of crisis management researchers. Nonetheless, a number of challenges face scholars in their efforts to produce impactful knowledge.

One challenge stems from the fact that the best crisis management practices are those which anticipate and protect against foreseeable crises (Pearson & Clair, 1988). Organizations engaging in proactive crisis management are substantially less likely to experience crises and therefore tend to be “invisible” to crisis management researchers. Researchers could make important strides toward understanding and sharing knowledge about these best practices by finding ways to study organizations that have averted crises.

Another key challenge arises when researchers encounter evidence that pits organizational outcomes, such as financial performance, against stakeholder or societal interests. For example, how should we approach the presentation of “practical implications” if we discover empirical evidence that firms which adopt a defensive posture fare better than those which seek

to accommodate stakeholders or victims? For this reason, crisis management researchers must consider the implications of our research from both a managerial and stakeholder perspectives. It is possible that the “best practice” from a crisis management perspective may not align with what is best for society. We ask our panel to consider how crisis management researchers should handle such situations.

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