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DEFINITIONS IN CRISIS MANAGEMENT AND CRISIS LEADERSHIP

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Introduction

The following terms are framed differently by social phenomena and professional sectors so there is little agreement on their exact definition. In fact, there are so many published definitions that to present them all would not be constructive. This variety in the meaning of terms, which would be completely bewildering to a scientist, and is completely contrary to a scientific approach, has resulted in authors having to redefine terminology repeatedly in almost every paper and book that is published. The following terms are defined in this paper with prominent examples so that their use in the DKI-APCSS executive course on Comprehensive Crisis Management is clear.

Leadership

It has been argued that the term 'leadership' is ambiguous due to its origins in the common vocabulary (Yukl, 2006, Janda, 1960). If this is truly the case, all languages must be said to be entirely ambiguous apart from recently constructed words. At this point, it is necessary to look backwards to clarify concept origins.

The earliest written evidence of this originates from Egyptian hieroglyphics dating back to 2300 BC. In fact, most character-based languages have unique symbols for "leader" and "leadership" and do not spell them out. According to one Egyptian scholar, the Pharaoh possessed the quality of a perceptive heart and was endowed with speech that was characterized by authority and justice (Lichtheim, 1973). Similar qualities were enounced by Sun Tzu in 512 BC, who

Key Points

- The term "leader" or "leadership" have taken on many symbols and definitions throughout history.
- Several descriptions of what makes for effective leadership have gained more favor than others. Among the more widely accepted factors are traits, behavior, information processing, relationships and follower perceptions (Kets de Vries, 2004).
- In this paper, we examine two types of organizations; those in normal-mode that predominantly pursue a linear path, and those in crisis-ready-mode that experience a greater degree of non-linear events.

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wrote that a leader stands for the virtues of wisdom, sincerity, benevolence, courage and strictness (Tzu, 2005).

In the languages of Scotland and France, the word for leader originated from the image of a person's head which indicates a cerebral role (Adair, 2004). The use of a description of this nature indicates that the role involves control and power over the body (followers) and greater view of or understanding of a situation. In the legacy of the pathfinder, the English word for leader originates from the words path (laed) and travel (laeden). In this context, the leader was expected to know a route between two places so that the followers could be guided to a destination in safety. Similar terms, framed by their situations, can be found in all languages.

Attempts to produce a single unifying definition have repeatedly fallen short of acceptance. Leadership authors like to quote Stogdill who said, "there are almost as many definitions of leadership as there are persons who have attempted to define the concept," but this just states the obvious. The efforts of writers on the ingredients of effective leadership have produced conclusions about what leaders do that are often confusing and even conflicting (Bass and Stogdill, 1990). In this climate of disagreement, several descriptions of what makes for effective leadership have gained more favor than others. Among the more widely accepted factors are traits, behavior, information processing, relationships and follower perceptions (Kets de Vries, 2004).

Although understandings of this term have undergone fluctuations throughout history, the accumulation of expectations has resulted in the following definitions:

"the behavior of an individual...directing the activities of a group toward a shared goal" (Hemphill and Coons, 1957).

"the influential increment over and above mechanical compliance with the routine directives of the organization" (Katz and Kahn, 1978).

"is exercised when persons...mobilize...institutional, political, psychological, and other resources so as to arouse, engage, and satisfy the motives of followers" (Burns, 1978).

"the process whereby one or more individuals succeed in attempting to frame and define the reality of others" (Smircich and Morgan, 1982).

"the process of influencing the activities of an organized group toward goal achievement" (Rauch and Behling, 1984).

"is about articulating visions, embodying values, and creating the environment within which things can be accomplished" (Richards and Engle, 1986).

"a process of giving purpose (meaningful direction) to collective effort, and causing willing effort to be expended to achieve purpose" (Jacobs and Jaques, 1990).

"the process of making sense of what people are doing together so that people will understand and be committed" (Drath and Palus, 1994).

“the ability of an individual to influence, motivate, and enable others to contribute toward the effectiveness and success of the organization” (House, 1999).

“the ability to see the present in terms of the future while maintaining respect for the past”(Rowitz, 2001).

“a process used by an individual to influence group members toward the achievement of group goals in which the group members view the influence as legitimate” (Howell and Costley, 2006).

Several themes emerge, but so many of these definitions are incomplete. Therefore, in the spirit of confusion, agreement, and disagreement, **this paper defines leadership** as:

“The capacity of an individual to perceive important issues, to construct a mission/vision, to discern necessary means, to make critical decisions, to influence followers and to successfully complete the mission.”

Organization mode

An interesting viewpoint on organization modes originates from a systems perspective. In this theoretical corner, crises are thought of as inherent chaotic components of any system that are entirely expected, but which are not predictable (Kiel, 1994). As such, they are not viewed as exceptional, unexplainable occurrences, but rather as quite ‘normal’ aspects of reality. The idea is that human systems have evolved over time to achieve increasingly higher orders of complexity in response to events (Waldrop, 1992). In other words, we have adapted to such an extent that we expect crises to happen and we instinctively act to prevent and manage them.

Thus, we are thought to live in a linear world that is occasionally beset by nonlinear events that are not bound by the same rules and which possess a different dynamic (Bertuglia and Vaio, 2005). These nonlinear events can be crises and are explored in chaos theory. A system in chaos is said to be “constantly shifting ... between stagnation and anarchy, the one place where a complex system can be spontaneous, adaptive and alive” (Waldrop, 1992). But this evolution is not limited to slow change as observed in the natural environment; it also applies to organizations. The human brain continuously adapts and increases or decreases in complexity in response to its environment due to the drive to survive. Organizations do likewise in their efforts to survive and thrive. Thus, people and organizations exposed to differing levels of instability develop different response capacities due to their different skills, knowledge and experience.

In this paper, we thus examine two types of organizations; those in normal-mode that predominantly pursue a linear path, and those in crisis-ready-mode that experience a greater degree of non-linear events.

Normal-Mode organizations

Nobody can agree on what leadership and management actually are because these terms are defined by researchers who define them based on their individual perspective in the circumstances of interest (Yukl, 1989). That said, it is accurate to note that the majority of research into leadership and management theory has been developed by business for business. In the context of this study, business organizations are thus ‘normal-mode’ organizations. Although they have their share of crises, conflict and catastrophe, the conduct of their affairs proceeds according to a series of fairly standard, fairly certain, fairly expected rules of play

in environments that are fairly predictable – i.e. they are primarily linear in chaos theory terminology. Their normal operation mode is a stable environment that is infrequently beset by crisis.

Crisis-Ready-Mode organizations

Some organizations operate in a heightened state since they deal with certain crises on a day-to-day basis. Health professionals and hospitals are prime examples of individuals and organizations that deal with a considerable amount of regular crises. However, the field of emergency management constitutes an extreme example of crisis-mode personnel and organizations.

The fact that most crises in these environments are expected is evidence in support of them being encountered so often that they are considered ‘normal’ events. Nevertheless, they are nonlinear and are subject to the rules of chaos theory. When linear and nonlinear events are analyzed mathematically, the input and output variables in linear systems are based on predictable mathematical functions that result in expected output from a defined input. However, in nonlinear systems, input and output are not well related. So, a small input could have a large effect and a large input could have a small effect (Kiel, 1994). And so in a health system, the regular daily crises are considered normal, but their management can produce unpredictable results.

Crisis

The problem with the term ‘crisis; is that it is used in different ways by different professions. In a general sense, the term implies an undesirable and unexpected situation that possesses latent harm to people, organizations or society. If it can be taken that systems are normally not in crisis, then a crisis would be an abnormal event (Almond et al., 1973). Although this is more obvious in stable systems, it also applies to systems that are normally chaotic and which operate in crisis-mode – the aberration is just bigger or more apparent.

Normal-Mode definitions of Crisis

The Harvard Business School definition states that a crisis is:

“a change – either sudden or evolving – that results in an urgent problem that must be addressed immediately” (Luecke and Barton, 2004).

Unfortunately, business consultants have a flair for the dramatic and exaggerate to their own profit. Although crises typically engender a sense of urgency, there are countless chronic crises that pose long-term risks and which are not urgent in that they do not pose an immediate danger. Climate change, for one, dismisses this definition.

It is also true that business consultants like to focus on negative aspects to enhance the attractiveness of their solutions:

“any event that can seriously harm the people, reputation, or financial condition of an organisation” (Barton, 2007).

“an unstable time for an organisation, with a distinct possibility for an undesirable outcome” (Devlin, 2007).

“any prodromal situation that runs the risk of: 1) escalating in intensity; 2) falling under close media scrutiny; 3) interfering with the normal operations of business; 4) Jeopardizing the positive public image presently enjoyed by a company or its officers; 5) damaging a company’s bottom line in any way” (Fink, 2002, Fink, 1986).

Like leadership, this term has ancient roots and was well understood. The Chinese defined it in the way they wrote it. Many crisis authors have spoken of how the word ‘crisis’ is composed of two characters (危机 wēi jī) – one meaning ‘danger’ and the other ‘opportunity’. But, it has been convincingly argued that the meaning of wēi jī may not be construed from a strict dictionary interpretation due to the complex nature of interpreting different combinations of Chinese characters (Mair, 2007). Although simple Chinese dictionaries show that the word jī has only a couple of meanings, it can acquire hundreds of meanings when it is used in combination with other characters. Thus, the only possible interpretation of wēi jī is ‘danger’ + ‘incipient moment/crucial point’. In other words, wēi jī refers to a potentially dangerous situation when something begins or changes.

Despite the failure to associate the word ‘opportunity’ with wēi jī, the fact remains that crises can produce remarkably positive outcomes. It has been said that virtually every crisis contains the seeds of success as well as the roots of failure (Augustine et al., 2000) and that crises contain an element of duality (Drennan and McConnell, 2007). The basic physics concept that every force has an equal and opposing force appears to apply here since some people always manage to benefit from the sufferings of others. Potential opportunities that can arise from a crisis extend far beyond the simple dictionary definition of opportunity (Drennan and McConnell, 2007) and demonstrate that failure to consider this aspect of crises is not advisable. It is thus telling and disappointing that the crisis gurus quoted above have elected to focus solely on danger and have failed to include opportunity in their definitions. Interestingly, only one crisis author was found that referred to the Greek origin of the word (krisis), which means to sift or separate (Klann, 2003). This calls to mind an old saying that suggests another meaning from that proposed above. Is a crisis an event that separates the men from the boys – a defining moment?

Crisis-Ready-Mode definitions of Crisis

Political science researchers are another strong runner in the crisis research field. Their views are different because they are not constrained in the way that business researchers are by the limitations or organizational or economic thinking. Boin, t’Hart, Stern & Sundelius (2005) considered that construed threat was subjective and arrived at the following definition based on input from other researchers (Rosenthal et al., 1989, Stern, 2003).

“a serious threat to the basic structures or the fundamental values and norms of a system, which under time pressure and highly uncertain circumstances necessitates making vital decisions” (Boin et al., 2005).

This definition reduces the elements of urgency and the fear propagated by business definitions, and yet still fails to address inherent opportunity. It also assumes that decisions are necessary to remove the crisis, whereas many crises are ignored by organizations or government until they fade away.

One definition of a crisis attempts to be all-inclusive, but reads like a narrative and is incredibly prescriptive and limiting:

“a damaging event or series of events, that display emergent properties which exceed an organization’s abilities to cope with the task demands that it generates and has implications that can effect a considerable proportion of the organization as well as other bodies. The damage that can be caused can be physical, financial, or reputational in its scope. In addition, crises will have both a spatial and temporal dimension and will invariably occur within a sense of ‘place’. Crises will normally be ‘triggered’ by an incident or another set of circumstances (these can be internal or external to the organisation), that exposes the inherent vulnerability that has been embedded within the ‘system’ over time” (Smith and Elliott, 2006)

Perhaps a more simple approach would suffice?

“an unstable or crucial time or state of affairs in which a decisive change is impending” (Merriam-Webster Inc, 2008).

“a situation that has reached a critical phase” (Merriam-Webster Inc, 2008).

From a military perspective, a crisis is described as:

“an environment...that defies the usual, orderly, linear processes of human or natural systems. ...Crises cannot be depended upon to display familiarity, stability, or predictability” (Hillyard, 2000).

These latter definitions do not exaggerate danger, nor do they indicate that a decision is required, nor do they indicate possible opportunity.

In this paper, a crisis is therefore defined as:

“An uncertain situation possessing latent risks and opportunities that must be resolved within a given timeframe.”

Crisis leadership

The following definition was proposed by Mitroff:

“crisis leadership...is proactive. It attempts to identify crises and prepare an organisation systematically, i.e., as a whole system, before a major crisis has happened” (Mitroff, 2004)

However, this lacks certain fundamental elements and so the following holistic definition of **crisis leadership**, which is based on a combination of previously stated definitions, is used in this paper.

“The capacity of an individual to recognize uncertain situations that possess latent risks and opportunities to ensure systematic preparedness, to discern necessary direction, to make critical decisions, to influence followers and to successfully eliminate or reduce the negative impact while taking full advantage of positive aspects within a given timeframe.”

Crisis management

There is far more agreement on what crisis management involves, however, there are still two major camps. Some definitions describe crisis management as a comprehensive approach involving a cycle that starts with preparedness and prevention, and extends through response to recovery and learning (Drennan and McConnell, 2007):

“crisis management...is helping avert crises or more effectively managing those that do occur” (Pearson et al., 1997).

“is part of a larger system of organizational risk management. ...ideally begins before a crisis actually occurs...with a thorough audit...[to identify] major problems [and] prioritize risks. ...is about crisis recognition [then] contain the problem” (Luecke and Barton, 2004).

These authors, however, did not often pay sufficient attention to the concept of crisis leadership. Indeed, most crisis management books written by business consultants do not even address crisis leadership or acknowledge it as a distinct function or process. This omission has created confusion and misunderstanding in the lay population. Acceptance of the above definition of crisis leadership severely curtails the breadth of crisis management as the following definitions show:

“ crisis management begins with the recognition of a prodromal event, a symptom of an oncoming crisis (Fink, 2002):

“crisis management...is primarily reactive. It addresses crises only after they have happened” (Mitroff, 2004).

“is about recognizing you have one, taking the appropriate actions to remedy the situation, being seen to take them and being heard to say the right things” (Regester and Larkin, 2005).

“special measures taken to solve problems caused by a crisis.

“to confine or minimize any damage to the organization’s reputation or image”(Devlin, 2007) .

This paper maintains that the roles differ considerably and stands by the following definition that **crisis management** is:

“The measures and methodologies used to recognize, control and limit the damage of a crisis, and its ripple effects.”

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