# CRISIS MANAGEMENT AND ORGANIZATIONAL DEVELOPMENT: TOWARDS THE CONCEPTION OF A LEARNING MODEL IN CRISIS MANAGEMENT

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## ABSTRACT

The field of crisis management currently faces two important limitations. First, this field has been distinguished by two major approaches to date, crisis management planning and analysis of organizational contingencies. However, despite what we have learned from these approaches, neither seems to lead to a crisis management learning model that fosters organizational resilience in coping with crises. Secondly, researchers have studied a number of events as case studies but have never synthesized these case studies. Consequently, each crisis seems idiosyncratic and administrators continue to repeat the same errors when a crisis occurs. The research proposal presented in this paper [1] aims to remove these limitations by bringing together two apparently opposing fields of study, that of crisis management, characterized by what are perceived as specific events, and that of organizational development, characterized by the strengthening of organizations' capacities to cope with lasting changes. This paper proposes to explore their potential to work together theoretically and empirically through a research design.

## 1  IMPORTANCE OF THE SUBJECT

Contrary to a widely-held, persistent belief, crises in contemporary societies can no longer be considered improbable and rare events (Rosenthal & Kouzmin,1996). The occurrence and diversity of types of crisis in our societies have increased (Hart & al., 2001; Quarantelli, 2001; Robert & Lajtha, 2002). Moreover, the time frame of crises has tended to expand (Rosenthal & Kouzmin, 1996; Hart & Boin, 2001), along with their geographic spread (Hart *et al*., 2001; Michel-Kerjan, 2003). Crisis management is on the public administration agenda and decision-makers are increasingly put on the carpet and pressed for answers on issues which they often find overwhelming (Drabek & Hoetmer, 1991; Pauchant & Mitroff, 1995; Boin & Lagadec, 2000). Despite accumulated experience in facing disasters, governmental responses are still inept (Piotrowski, 2006; Van Heerden, 2006).The extensive media coverage of events is too frequently oriented towards identifying the "guilty" rather than looking for solutions. Finally, the costs of catastrophes continue to grow (Nathan, 2000; Newkirk, 2001) and the insecurity is in all the spirits (Michel-Kerjan, 2003). These are the new realities organizations confront that require a fresh perspective on the issue of crisis management practice, as well as in the area of research.

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In addition to research on the industrial catastrophes of Bhopal, Chernobyl or Three Mile Island, and that on natural catastrophes, well-documented by the Disaster Research Center, and its principal investigators, Enrico Quarantelli and Russell Dynes, in recent years, we have seen the addition of research concerns touching a variety of crises in sectors as diverse as the health sector (the contaminated blood scandal, SARS, and avian flu), the political and humanitarian sector (the Rwandan genocide, and Darfur), the international relations sector and the growth of terrorism (the World Trade Center, Oklahoma City bombing, the London attack and the train attack in Madrid, Spain) and bio-terrorism (Anthrax attack), the agrobusiness sector (mad cow disease and the risks associated with genetically modified food), the environmental sector (deforestation, the thinning of the ozone layer and global warming), the business sector (Enron) and the multiplication of so-called natural catastrophes such as the Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans, the dangers associated with West Nile virus, the heat wave in Europe, the earthquake in Bhan in Iran, the tsunami in Southeast Asia and many others. Furthermore, a recent inventory carried out by Rosenthal, Boin & Comfort (2001) reflects this diversity of interests and the increasingly multidisciplinary nature of the field, which is another new reality that researchers are just beginning to recognize. This diversity – from Katrina, through SARS to terrorists attacks - presents new challenges to academics and practitioners in crisis management (Michel-Kerjan, 2003).

## 2   CURRENT STATE OF THE CRISIS MANAGEMENT LITERATURE

Since the start of the 1980s, the field of crisis management has been characterized by two main trends:   planning in crisis management and the analysis of organizational contingencies during a crisis. The literature on crisis management planning consists of a number of normative pronouncements aimed at increasing the efficiency of crisis interventions. Their authors highlight the need for emergency planning (Lagadec, 1991, 1996; Counts & Prowant, 1994; Perry & Nigg, 1985; Denis, 1993, 2002; Bugge, 1993; Sylves & Pavalak; Quarantelli, 1996), defining actions in relation to the various phases of the evolution of a crisis starting with the detection of warning signs up to post-crisis activities (Drabek & Hoetmer, 1991), stressing the development of a culture of security, both within organizations and in the population at large (Lagadec, 1991;  Tazieff, 1988; Denis, 1993, 2002; Toft & Reynolds, 1994; Pauchant, 1997), and the training and sensitization of leaders to their roles in times of crisis (Perry & Nigg, 1985; Lagadec, 1991, 1996, 1997; Kuban, 1995; Petak, 1985; Pauchant & Mitroff, 1995). Generalizing about crises has led several researchers including Reason (1997) to develop the high reliability organizations model. This model was largely inspired by experiences in security and risk management in the area of airlines, aerospace and nuclear energy. This model scrutinizes the chain of production and identifies the critical processes and/or "normal" operations that constitute areas of weakness or risk ("near miss"). Attempts to export this model have been made, notably in the medical world and the health sector in general with a view to guaranteeing a more secure provision of care. Unfortunately, administrators are still unfamiliar with this model (Bourrier, 2002). Moreover, it is criticized by some authors (Sagan, 1993; Perrow, 1994) for its lack of realism. In addition, this model seems to apply more to large industry and to the redesigning of its technical operations and technologies, and little or not at all to small and medium-sized enterprises, or to organizations having a role as social interveners during crises.

The literature analysing organizational contingencies features the complex and often disorganized dynamic amongst actors themselves, as well as the role and behaviour of citizens during crises. According to this perspective, crisis management should consider the larger social context, in addition to the characteristics of communities and organizations having to intervene in times of crisis. Thus, within communities, the main contingencies to study concern previous experience in crises (Dynes, 1970; Pery & Nigg, 1985; Britton, 1987), the nature of the social fabric (Dynes, 1970), citizens' level of participation in social life (Wenger, 1978; Wolensky, 1983; Echterling et al., 1988), the level of resources and the type of local infrastructure (Stallings & Schepart, 1990; Sylves & Pavalak, 1990), the rural, urban or semi-urban semi-rural location (Dynes, 1975; Lalonde, 2004), the social assistance dynamic (Wright et al., 1990; Kaniasty & Norris, 1995; Drabek & McEntire, 2003), the styles of attack (Denis, 1993, 2002) and any hostility towards the outside world (Quarantelli & Dynes, 1976). Research also highlights a variable geometry of intervention according to the missions of the organizations involved (Dynes, 1970, 1978, 1987; Britton, 1991; Denis, 1993), the strategies deployed (coalitions, alliances and disputes over control of resources) and the specific structural modalities adopted to confront the crisis (Milburn et al., 1983; Denis, 1993, 2002; Lagadec, 1991, 1996; Pauchant & Mitroff, 1995).

These two principal approaches have made a great contribution to crisis management research and to the expansion of knowledge. They contain many lessons for administrators and decision-makers. However, to date, this has not been enough to improve organizations' capacity to respond in a crisis. Indeed, a consensus is emerging amongst researchers about the obstacles encountered in incorporating this knowledge in organizational practice. In fact, researchers note the difficulty of transferring knowledge stemming from all of this research to administrators in organizations. This inhibits the implementation of proactive crisis management and the development of greater organizational and civic resilience in times of crisis (Rosenthal and Kouzmin, 1996; and Quarantelli, 2001). Administrators continue to repeat the same errors and do not seem to have absorbed the "lessons" from their experiences (Piotrowski, 2006). Why is it so difficult to draw lessons from crises and to make organizational changes as a result of these lessons? The main reasons advanced are as follows:

- the time or temporal framework of the crisis analysis is too limited (Bourrier, 2002);
- the issue does not remain a priority once the immediate crisis has passed (Petak, 1985; Lagadec, 1996; Rosenthal & Kouzmin, 1996; Nathan, 2000);
- after having experienced a crisis, the area is too sensitive for any discussions (Lagadec, 1996; Bourrier, 2002);
- the pressure of managing day-to-day affairs resurfaces and tends to eclipse the period which could be devoted to post-crisis reflection (Rosenthal & al., 1989; and Rosenthal & Kouzmin, 1996);
- the manager is avoiding his or her responsibilities (Lagadec, 1991, 1996);
- managers tend to pass this off to the experts (Rosenthal & Kouzmin, 1996; Bourrier, 2002) and to use them for political ends (Hart & al., 2001);
- administrators and interveners do not envisage the transferability of experiences during a crisis to routine practices (Roux-Dufort, 2000; Bourrier, 2002). These experiences are seen as eminently contingent with their own idiosyncrasies;
- there is a lack of sharing of experiences in crisis management across organizations (Bourrier, 2002), between sectors of activities and amongst countries (Hart & al., 2001).

## 3    CONTRIBUTION OF ORGANIZATIONAL DEVELOPMENT TO CRISIS MANAGEMENT PRACTICES

The concept of learning is increasingly central to crisis management researchers' concerns (Roux-Dufort, 2000; Simon & Pauchant, 2000; Stern, 1997). They are seeking models allowing for a lasting integration of organizational learning during crises. Therefore, such models remain largely to be created and invented (Roux-Dufort, 2000). The challenge is to transfer the accumulated knowledge flowing from concrete experiences, well-documented by crisis management researchers (in other words, reliable data), to a learning model in which organizational actors will be actively engaged. One of the avenues to better integrate this learning seems to us to be found in organizational development approaches. As Piotrowski (2006: 11) pointed out, "undoubtedly, OD practitioners and researchers will be relied upon by private and public organizations, governmental administrations, small businesses and large corporations". Organizational development (OD) can be defined as a process calling upon social and behavioural sciences to strengthen abilities and capacities of organizations over the long term to confront changes and to better attain their objectives (Cummings & Worley, 2005). OD is a field of practical application based on a process of accompaniment, initiated either internally or externally (Schein, 1999) and covering a vast panoply of activities (Church & al., 1994, Bazigos & Church, 1997; Worren & al., 1999; Carter & al., 2001, 2005; Rothwell & Sullivan, 2005; French & Bell, 1999): research-action; organizational diagnosis at various levels (individual—group—organization); feedback mechanisms for members of the organization (such as "survey feedback," "search conferencing," "coaching," etc.); and the design of interventions at the level of human processes, technostructure,  human resource management, global strategy, etc. These methods allow organizational actors to master new knowledge and ways of doing things. This idea of strengthening organizational abilities and capacities is also related to the notion of resilience put forward by Quarantelli (2001) and Rosenthal & Kouzmin (1996). Furthermore, OD may represent what Bourrier (2002) calls the "missing link" and thus address the concern about crisis management over a period of time through reconfiguring interventions and the support structures of these interventions. The field of OD seems to us particularly well-placed to effect this necessary transfer of theoretical knowledge into practice. The literature on organizational learning is vast but that which relates learning and crisis management is rather meagre. Indeed, we know a little more about the types and modes of learning but we do not know whether these apply to crisis management. Finally, the models described to date by researchers have remained rather theoretical and have seldom been applied.

## 4    PROPOSITION OF A NEW RESEARCH DESIGN

### 4.1    OBJECTIVES

This article is looking for a new goal research proposal that will relate two fields of study that have largely ignored each other to date, and, in the light of this rapprochement, to develop a learning model. We plan to offer responses to one of the central questions in crisis management to which, as of yet, no one has been able to offer a generic and integrated response: how can one ensure the long-term incorporation of the learning that takes place in organizations during a crisis and thus develop improved organizational resilience in times of crisis? More specifically, we plan to: 1) develop a new model of OD intervention, specific to crisis management; 2) establish the original contribution of

approaches in OD likely to guarantee lasting learning within organizations; and 3) synthesize research results from the most recent case studies in crisis management which, to date, have been handled independently, and to discern the lessons which emerge time after time.

## 4.2  METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

Hart & al. (2001) encourage a design specifying transversal and cross-disciplinary crisis management research. We believe that researchers in the twenty-first century have needed to become more interested in the transversal nature of crises and to develop research specifications allowing for comparison of management practices across sectors or countries. The methodological framework of the research proposed takes these new recommendations into account. Thus, cross-disciplinarity is guaranteed by the convergence of the literature on crisis management and that on organizational development. Cross-disciplinarity is assured by an inventory of case studies in crisis management in an array of fields and sectors.

Firstly, a meta-analysis of the field of crisis management will be conducted based on two complementary sources of information, that of the scientific community in the form of research results (reliable data), and that emerging from expert committees in the form of recommendations. Second, our framework permits the easy exploitation of existing and rich data from diverse sources.

### 4.2.1  Academic research

One aspect of our methodological framework will come from an inventory of case studies presented between 2000 and 2006 in specialized journals in crisis and disaster management. The research proposal aims to classify the research results on the basis of five key dimensions:

- issues related to *planification* and the use of formal rules and routines;
- *strategies* deployed to coordinate actions (emergent planning, interventions in various phases, alliances, coalitions, etc.);
- the involvement of local, national and internationl *leadership*;
- *civic behaviour*, both of those directly affected by the crisis and those living on the periphery, volunteers and others potentially offering assistance;
- *task expansion* and novel forms or professional and organizational socialization between actors.

These five dimensions have often been identified as particularly vital to crisis management but there is no satisfying synthesis and this is contributing to the persistence of the idea that each crisis is unique and that administrators cannot really learn lasting lessons from their experiences and improve/consolidate their capacity to confront future crises.

### 4.2.2  Expert recommendations

The research proposal also aim to proceed to a classification of recommendations and lessons from crises such as those stemming from a content analysis of the expert committee reports on major events that occurred over the last decade. It will focus on five major crises that have been subject to public inquiries: SARS at Toronto (Canada), Ice Storm in Quebec (Canada) Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans (USA), the Tsunami (Southeast Asia) and the

Heat Wave (France). The same dimensions or markers will serve to classify the recommendations or lessons stemming from the analysis of these expert committees. We hypothesize that the material we are to collect through these reports will emphasize and reinforce the planning perspective.

### 4.2.3   Learning design

A synthesis of results from academic research and expert recommendations will be obtained through classifying them with reference to:

- types or contents of lessons, returning to the question *what have we learned?*, whether new information, the consolidation of existing organizational routines stemming either from crisis plans or routines learned within the organization, or tacit knowledge coming from socialization in a trade or profession or from an organizational cultural environment, etc.;
- learning conditions, returning to the question *how or in what conditions did we learn?,* including experimentation in real time in "real" situations, simulations of the experience, training, confrontation and sharing of experiences, etc.;
- the potential to transfer knowledge within the organization, aiming to respond to the question *how can we incorporate this knowledge in an organizational learning model?*

### 4.2.4   OD Contributions

Following a review of the literature, we will identify approaches and methods recognized as effective, and successfully applied by practitioners-researchers in organizational development (Carter & al., 2001, 2005; Rothwell & Sullivan, 2005; French & Bell, 1999), and we will compare the synthesis obtained in 3) with reliable data from OD research according to subject matter: human processes, technostructure, human resource management, and strategy. This division is borrowed from Cummings & Worley (2005) who situate the OD methods and approaches in a global perspective ("a system-wide approach").

### 4.2.5   Classification scheme

In the light of considerations presented in the methodological framework, a blueprint has been developed to classify the data, similar to that which Miles & Huberman (1994) characterize as an "unranked meta-matrix."   Information classified under each dimension will have to correspond to the quotations or paraphrases from the extracts of selected articles or reports. This will be classified through the use of appropriate software for processing qualitative data. Researchers who rely on qualitative methods find themselves confronted with the issue of the condensation of data, that is with techniques allowing for the synthesis of a large array of data in the form of words and not figures (Miles & Huberman, 1991; Thiétart, 1999; Easterby-Smith & al., 1991). The present details of the condensation process that we have followed to render intelligible the great mass of information with which we have worked will be presented in a research report. The initial classification scheme, comprised of four principal dimensions, allows a relatively high degree of latitude for the discovery of more precise sub-themes. Following an inductive approach, we will include sub-themes for each dimension as they occur.

## 5    AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

We can identify promising lines of inquiry for research stemming from our research project, at the empirical level as well as at the theoretical level.

Most governments in the international community are currently facing the risk of a pandemic linked to the potential for the avian flu virus. These governments have already engaged in prevention activities and crisis planning. This case corresponds well to the conclusions of Rosenthal and Kouzmin (1996) suggesting that administrators' and researchers' future concerns will touch not only crises that have already occurred but also, and perhaps increasingly, incipient crises ("creeping crises") with latent, gradual and progressive effects. The manner in which governments are preparing to confront these incipient crises represents a particularly fruitful avenue for testing the validity of the learning model to be developed in the framework of our research project. Thus, there will be a very interesting and relevant empirical foundation starting with this current experience.

The conception of a learning model raises a complementary question about the vector or vehicle to transfer learning from researchers to administrators (Roy & al., 1995). Frequently, consultants working in the field of management are called upon as facilitators. Consequently, a debate has occurred amongst authors as to the real assistance provided to organizations from external consulting resources. These authors wonder about the quality of "packages" being marketed and the instrumentalization of knowledge that results. This is certainly worth investigating from a theoretical angle.

It would also be advisable to extend the field of this research to various types of crisis. For example, would the contribution of OD be similar or different according to whether one deals with natural disaster, with a technological catastrophe, terrorist attacks or management failure (skewed values, deception, misconduct) ? Several authors (Pauchant & Mitroff, 1995; Lerbinger, 1997) propose that organizations should create a portfolio interventions according to various types' of crisis. Quarantelli (1993) brings a distinction between consensus-type crises under which natural and technological disasters are included and conflict-type crises under which riots and civil strife disturbances are included. He states that the characteristics and the consequences of each type of crisis are different and should be analyzes distinctively. The investigation of the practices of OD according to various types' of crisis constitutes another promising track of the research which it will be important to deepen in the future.

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