

LEARNING UNDER PRESSURE: THE DYNAMICS OF ADAPTATION AND TRANSFORMATION IN THE CONTEXT OF CRISIS MANAGEMENT

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ABSTRACT

In an ever-changing world of threats and vulnerabilities, crisis management actors must continuously learn to adapt and transform their response capabilities. The most important challenge lies in the duality of the crisis management system, which is a system for planning between crises as well as a system for responding during crises. In this context, it is necessary to identify a model that allows understanding how systems subject to crisis conditions learn to adapt and transform. Such a model is used to improve understanding of the dynamics of learning and changing crisis management systems. Despite the fact that the global response to the COVID-19 pandemic has rapidly developed countermeasures, mainly of a medical nature, it has failed to ensure the resilience of health systems and economies, with the total human and economic cost still being felt. Based on this reality, our objective is to identify, through concrete examples, how we should learn from these shortcomings, i.e., how to implement more inclusive and equitable frameworks to prevent and respond to crises (health crises in this case). Taking measures to rebuild public and investor confidence in resilient local productive capacity, supply chains, regulatory frameworks, etc. and putting the voices of crisis managers at the heart of decision-making can help ensure preparedness for future threats. So, it's time to move beyond just talking about learning under pressure and implementing lessons and instead act consciously for a more resilient future.

KEYWORDS: crisis management, COVID-19, learning under pressure, management system

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1. INTRODUCTION

Crises are events that affect modern societies in the most fundamental ways, threatening people's lives, economies and society's values, effectively changing the world. The frequency, nature and consequences of such events pose unprecedented challenges both to society as a whole and to decision-makers at the government level. However, this statement should not be taken as an apodictic exaggeration.

Crises and disasters can be dramatic in some respects, but the capacity to cope with some of these events is increasing. Nowadays, some "traditional" disasters rarely occur in modern societies, although they were ubiquitous not so long ago (e.g., cholera). In this context, we can say that we are safer today than we have ever been (Wildavsky, 1988).

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However, crisis situations are characterized by broad uncertainty and high stakes, as well as severe constraints in the time available for analysis and response (Boin et al., 2016). The actors involved in crisis management can be approached through the prism of a heterogeneous system of systems, in which each subsystem, i.e., actor, has a role, has a specific culture and procedures, but among which there are few common theories in use. In essence, achieving conscious and coordinated change in such a system of systems is the most important challenge.

2. LEARNING UNDER PRESSURE

2.1 Challenges for crisis management

A crisis is a complex situation that poses management difficulties. The actors involved in managing such a situation are under unprecedented pressure because they have to deal with problems whose consequences they cannot foresee. The human condition (family and life), but also the influence of the environment (political, economic, media, etc.) push organizational actors to lose control over the crisis situation.

Starting from these considerations, we ask: "is it possible to learn from the failure of crisis management actions and adapt future responses?". Our main answer hypothesis is based on feedback from experience and knowledge management. It is about shaping crisis management from the perspective of a dynamic system, which emphasizes regulatory loops and collaborative work by highlighting the dimension of communication, coordination and cooperation.

The prospect of a crisis usually gives rise to at least three types of challenges. First of all, we consider the political-administrative challenges of preparing the actors involved to face sudden adversity (Lodge & Hood, 2010). Second, crises test the structure of organizations and society as a whole. Managers, citizens and institutions need to demonstrate resilience if they want to "recover" from a crisis and restore normalcy (Schulman & Roe, 2016). Third, crises pose challenges for decision-makers at all levels of management. They require "deep thinking" (Dror, 1986), i.e., identifying a model to understand how systems subject to crisis conditions learn to adapt and transform.

Crises usually come as a surprise to leaders and the actors involved in managing them. In a crisis, leaders will find that bureaucracy and operational complexity are not ideal for dealing with non-routine events. However, despite numerous constraints, leaders are held accountable for any failure that occurs under their leadership. From this perspective, effective crisis management is somewhat akin to a "mission impossible" (Hargrove & Glidewell, 1990), which can be approached through the prism of five executive tasks:

1. Preparing for a possible crisis;
2. Understanding an emerging and/or evolving crisis;
3. Manage response networks;
4. Providing credible responses/actions;
5. Learning under pressure.

Each of the tasks presented is important and requires different skill sets, organizational strategies, and resources. Without minimizing the importance of the first four aspects, we will analyse in detail the learning under pressure from the simple reason that it gives dynamism to organizational adaptation and transformation in the context of crisis management.

2.2 Literature review

Building on a theoretical integration of literature on organizational learning and crisis management, learning under pressure or learning in crisis goes beyond approaching learning as a process that occurs before, during or after the crisis.

Organizational learning involves considering what is known and moving on to something else, previously unknown. Organizational crisis describes a situation that disturbs and challenges organizational fundamentals, threatens survival and creates circumstances in which there is a lack of immediate and accessible response mechanisms, thus threatening organizational legitimacy and performance due to the negative results it can generate. Most crises are characterized by high ambiguity, low probability of similar future events and unpredictability. In this context created by the previous conceptualization, it should be noted that the relationship between crisis and learning has been addressed only tangentially in the crisis management literature, but, with a few exceptions, it has not been systematically examined.

Learning under pressure starts from the premise that the unknown and uncertainty shape how both learning and crisis are experienced. This introduces the way to understand learning, crisis and their relationship as a dynamic practical process. This perspective brings to the fore the key assumptions that initiate the debate on learning from failure (and success) and provides new directions to explain why failure can be an endemic organizational challenge. In essence, it is about the fact that the mistakes that generate a certain crisis are repeated and we tend to interpret this process as a failure to learn from past events. Although some studies emphasize the importance of learning from failures as a basis for improving crisis response, it is itself a source of organizational learning (Madsen & Desai V., 2010). The challenge remains that learning from failure is not as simple as it is supposed to be.

We believe it is necessary to understand the dynamics of learning and crisis, which may explain why critical incidents can be perceived as crises. It is possible that such incidents considered critical and having only the appearance of a crisis, are just difficult situations, which subsequently escalate and become a crisis, and this is likely to generate a whole series of failures, which, implicitly, can hinder learning, especially if they are orchestrated as part of a post-rationalization process. This is usually the case for post-action analyses commonly practiced in high-risk industries (Malz, 2006).

As a result, learning in crisis must be approached through the prism of a way of learning, in tune with the emerging conditions that contribute to the creation of what culminates and is perceived to be a crisis. This mode of learning essentially captures how these processes are experienced or explained (prospective or retrospective), as well as the conditions for learning created through a state of flow that encourages individuals and organizations to exercise their judgments by questioning deep beliefs and deep-seated norms, revising in the process some of their core practices. Conceptualized in these terms, learning in crisis addresses both how we learn and how we change our experiential learning practices (Antonacopoulou & Sheaffer, 2013).

There are two main streams connecting learning and crisis: the first is about building resilience (Weick & Sutcliffe, 2007), and the second considers learning as part of crisis preparedness (Mitroff et al., 2006). Both approaches take a cognitive view of learning.

The cognitive approach to crisis management states that managers respond irrationally and exhibit errors of judgment in a way that harms their ability to process information and make decisions (Pearson & Clair, 1998). In other words, the relationship between crisis and learning is based on the assumption that a better understanding of what causes crises and the opportunity to learn from past crises can prevent future crises from occurring (Kovoor-Misra et al., 2000). In this context, crises are attributed to managerial deficiencies, and the lack of defensive mechanisms makes organizations more prone to crises.

One type of defensive mechanism refers to the situation in which individuals develop a strong sense of identification with the organization, which for them constitutes an ideal perceived as invulnerable. In such idyllic circumstances, a kind of myopia is generated, which prevents individuals from seeing and perceiving warning signs and reinforces the belief that "things will resolve themselves" (Schwartz, 1987).

Generally, in times of crisis, third parties interested in the evolution of an organization inform decision-makers at organizational level about early warning signals, but most of the time such warnings are distorted precisely from within the structure. There is a tendency to put into practice defensive routines that deny such situations or contexts and, in this way, delimit the organization from negative events, which does nothing but increase the predisposition to crisis and perpetuate it, instead of preventing it. Such behaviours are not evidence of learning in crisis or under pressure, nor of learning from failure, because they are related to a series of contextual and/or personal factors that do not allow learning and subscribe to models of incompetence, denial, lack of foresight, irresponsibility or even poor definition of problems and regulatory mechanisms.

In this context, we believe that learning under the pressure of crisis should be aimed at nothing more than practices and judgments based on experimentation, intuition and improvisation. It also does not have to distinguish between different types of learning in relation to crisis stages (before, during and after), a context in which the linear and static vision of learning and crisis acquires a dynamic dimension, focused on management and organizational practices as part of everyday experiences. If organizations and leaders adopt a practical way of dealing with crisis, they are more likely to face the unknown and uncertainty from a much more flexible perspective. This means that, instead of responding to the crisis with radical changes that generate long-term effects, they can engage in practical actions such as experimentation, improvisation, imagination and pragmatism, combining which creates the ability to sustain everyday actions (Barnett & Pratt, 2000).

We believe this is essentially how pressure learning comes into managerial practice. It is necessary to focus mainly on critical judgments and learning practices, on reconceptualizing the relationship between learning and crisis, rather than focusing on failure, which offers only a limited guarantee that replication of the same mistakes will be avoided in the future.

The implementation of the same actions does not guarantee in any way the achievement of the same success, and failure occurs as a result of conditions that bring together a series of aspects related to emotional, cognitive, social, psychological and political forces, which significantly influence and often dictate the judgments made.

If crisis and learning are based on the choices managers make, then more attention needs to be paid to understanding how the judgments underlying the choices are made. This is akin to what Aristotle called "phronesis", as a relational way of knowledge based on virtues and standards of excellence pursued on the path to perfection. However, we cannot say that learning is exclusively positive. In fact, the challenge of turning learning into a positive contributor to individual and organizational sustainability and future growth lies precisely in the inherent crisis necessary for learning itself.

As is known, learning is a recursive process, which generates a variety of consequences, many of them unintended. The element of surprise and differentiation are inherent in repetition, and this amplifies the significance of learning in / from the crisis, opening up new opportunities and new possibilities. In fact, repetition (not replication) allows the discovery of new connections and interdependencies, which can develop learning practices. Replicating the same experience does not lead to perfection (Nonaka & Von Krogh, 2009). But repeating certain situations, but doing things differently each time, opens up new possibilities for learning. This is because learning in general, and learning in crisis in particular, is not only about new behaviours and visible actions, but also about critical judgments, reflecting the emerging choices that actions seek to express.

2.3 Learnings from COVID-19 crisis

With the declaration of the COVID-19 pandemic, our country was affected not only by a deep crisis, but by three: a pandemic (health crisis), an economic collapse (economic crisis) and one of the most difficult periods of political decisions in recent years (political crisis). Dealing with all of this has dominated most of the energy, attention, and even emotions of all of us.

But we have overcome these watershed moments, which allows us to evaluate the changes that have taken place, especially since we have had a lot to learn.

Under the pressure of the health crisis, we learned that a pandemic can trigger real revolutions. Through concerted action, the medical scientific community can do amazing things. The time threshold needed to create conventional vaccines has advanced successfully. It took just 11 months to create the new messenger RNA (mRNA) vaccines from Pfizer-BioNTech and Moderna. In this context, the process may have forever changed the way medicines are developed. Sure, the "findings" come after more than a decade of research into mRNA vaccines, which teach human cells how to produce the protein that triggers a specific immune response.

However, although production and anti-Covid intervention have been accelerated, access inequities have not been overcome. The shaping of global health by a small group of multinational pharmaceutical companies and public and private international organizations has largely distorted research priorities, funding streams and distribution of health interventions in terms of resources and power (Kentikelenis & Rochford, 2019). As a result, now is the time to apply the lessons of COVID-19 to transform the global health architecture by building more transparent, equitable and inclusive health systems, enhanced by increased investment in the field, to ensure better preparedness for future pandemics.

As we have shown, crisis interventions are context-specific and evidence-based, which is crucial for future responses. In the context of COVID-19, however, the measures implemented were not always context-specific or evidence-based, leading to limited effectiveness. For example, studies (Alakija, 2023) they found that individual distancing implemented in high-income countries led to smaller increases in the value of well-being in times of crisis. In addition, containment measures have contributed to considerable disruptions to health services.

The effects were felt most strongly by people who were in a more precarious situation at the beginning of the pandemic. A study of the World Bank (Agrawal et al., 2021) on the uneven impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on income, employment and food security found that social and economic restrictions in 59 countries have resulted in greater and more lasting income and employment losses and greater food insecurity in low-income countries than in other countries. And these effects were most pronounced for women, young people and those with lower levels of education.

As regards the effect of school closures, although learning losses were less severe than expected, the pandemic increased learning inequality and reduced educational trajectories in older students (Moscoviz & Evans, 2022). Higher learning losses and school dropout rates were observed in rural communities compared to urban communities and among students of lower socioeconomic status than higher socioeconomic status – especially for adolescent girls and young women.

Another learning outcome under the pressure of COVID-19 relates to the need to create a favourable socio-economic and political environment. The importance of addressing social structures that constrain or enable health-related behaviors should be anticipated. Clear public health messages must be effective in controlling the pandemic, there must be strong political leadership, meaningful community engagement, and avoiding stigma and marginalization. They are essential to build public trust and ensure adherence to public health guidance.

In the same context, it should also be noted that a multidisciplinary and integrated approach to fighting a pandemic is essential. It must address the complex interactions between the viral

pathogen, human behaviour, emerging protective tools and technologies, and the social context. The collaboration between scientists with expertise in the behavioral-social sphere, community members, who represent the eventual beneficiaries of prevention and care services, respectively biomedical scientists involved in vaccine development and therapeutic recovery would be the ideal team to coordinate a response campaign in health crises. In practice, however, the COVID-19 National Scientific Advisory Councils were composed of individuals with limited biomedical skills in understanding a new respiratory virus and who provided guidance on topics on which they had little expertise.

When it comes to transformation as a result of learning from the COVID-19 crisis, we have to admit that the pandemic has led us to befriend technology, with no turning back. Undoubtedly, the most important long-term social lesson is digital solutions, which have become the first choice for managing life's tasks for a large part of the population. It is increasingly evident that modern, easy-to-use virtual tools are the new reality. People learned to use new technologies that, in many cases, were the only sure way to get on with life and stay connected. We refer here to teleworking, telemedicine, food and consumer goods delivery applications, online payments, financial technologies, e-learning, etc.

3. CONCLUSIONS

The response to a crisis cannot be prescriptive, based only on what has been learned from previous experiences. In crisis, learning is used as a basis for experiencing possible developments translated into terms of inter- and intra-organizational action, interaction and inaction.

Learning under pressure serves to enhance the nature of knowledge, communication and collective commitments to create the knowledge needed to put crisis action into practice. Each action will generate a response, which is certainly not desirable. It takes continuous negotiation with unknown conditions to get a reaction response. The adjustments that occur between actions, choices, judgments, and reactions are those that make viable connections in the middle of the action. Learning offers new possibilities, based on judgments and actions, offered by the crisis itself.

In this context, learning under pressure is not only a means to avoid the inherent pitfalls of crisis, but brings together a series of social, psychological, political, emotional and cognitive aspects, which through integration form practical judgments, which form the basis of everyday actions, manifesting how learning and knowledge act simultaneously, responding to the crises that organizations are affected by.

Learning under pressure can become a viable response to emerging learning challenges and crises, as it offers not only the opportunity to experience the practice of learning differently, but also to face the crisis while learning itself. It arises in response to the unknown and advocates the acceptance of different ways of thinking and acting as part of a wide range of possible responses. Its integrative role enables a targeted approach to crisis, actively seeking to make connections with it and thus providing a basis for addressing crisis as a central element of organisational learning and crisis management.

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