

## **Management in crisis: viruses, earthquakes and tornadoes, oh my!**

What a hectic day. I woke up to the news of an earthquake in my home state where most of my family live. Seven days earlier the World Health Organization had declared the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak a global pandemic. Two days earlier my university was shut down and all my classes were switched to an online format. The day ended with the National Weather Service issuing a tornado watch for the Texas County I live in. The day was March 18, 2020. I had trouble sleeping that night, but as the sky eventually started to change to light gray and the birds started to sing, I realized that life will continue on and I thought of Ben Harper's lyrics: we must all have/the will to live/you got to have/the will to live. I knew that I needed to think of ways I could help. Then on March 20th, the CEO of Emerald Publishing, Vicky Williams said in an email concerning the COVID-19 crisis, "The answers to this crisis will come from the incredible power, dedication and resilience of the research and public health community. . ." Vicky's words made it clear to me that an important way I could help is through the pages of Emerald Publishing's very first publication that started the company over a half century before: *Management Decision*. Finally, my thoughts were cemented in the beginning of May, when the head of publishing at Emerald, Sally Wilson said in an email, ". . . we believe passionately in publishing research that makes a difference in the real world." As such, *Management Decision* created this special issue to directly apply the words of Kurt Lewin (1951), "There's nothing so practical as good theory", to the area of managing crisis in an organizational context, in order to help practitioners of management use good theory to correctly guide action by turning scientific knowledge into practical wisdom. In particular, this special issue focuses on presenting well-developed theory in order to provide potential interventions and solutions to managing crisis in real-life organizations in the tradition of Lewin's action research (see: Bargal, 2006). Before providing an overview of the articles presented in this special issue, the difficulty of addressing crisis in an organizational context will be discussed.

Over 2000 years ago, Hippocrates said in *The Aphorisms* that, "Life is short, and Art long, the crisis fleeting; experience perilous, and decision difficult". Although Hippocrates aptly puts crisis in context in terms of the temporary nature any particular crisis may play, he also explains the long-term effects such crisis can have in terms of experience and decisions. The perilous nature of experience and in particular, the difficulty of making decisions under crisis, goes to the heart of the matter for an organization in crisis. Nevertheless, what constitutes a crisis is subjective. Merriam-Webster (see <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/crisis>) provides three different definitions for crisis. The first definition is based on a personal crisis, "an emotionally significant event or radical change of status in a person's life." The second definition refers to a particular event in terms of a, "decisive moment". The third definition is situationally driven according to a, "crucial time or state of affairs in which a decisive change is impending". Although crisis in an organizational setting may include aspects of an individual-level crisis and specific events, often the third situationally-dependent definition more fully captures how crisis occurs in a complex modern-day organization.

Given the multifaceted influence of crisis on already intricately structured organizations, the decision-makers are often left with limited understanding of how the admittedly temporary crisis may impact the long-term health of the organization. The difficulties surrounding the ability to grasp the impact of crisis for a leader of an organization may be likened to Einstein and Infeld's (1966, p. 31) analogy of the man attempting to understand the



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mechanism of a watch which cannot be opened. "He sees the face and the moving hands, even hears its ticking, but he has no way of opening the case. If he is ingenious he may form some picture of a mechanism which could be responsible for all the things he observes, but he . . . will never be able to compare his picture with the real mechanism and he cannot even imagine the possibility or the meaning of such a comparison." Similarly, it is not until the organization can be opened that the mechanisms can be fully understood, but like a watch, how the mechanisms connect together to create working processes can only be known by seeing the process in action. If any particular aspect of the organization stops, full understanding is lost.

Unlike the mechanism of a watch, however, if such organizational processes become inflexible and unchanging, then crisis may have devastating influence. Written in stone in United States of America's Washington District of Columbia at the Thomas Jefferson Memorial, Thomas Jefferson says it best, ". . . with the change of circumstances, institutions must advance also to keep pace with the times. We might as well require a man to wear still the coat which fitted him when a boy as civilized society to remain ever under the regimen of their barbarous ancestors." Here then lies the extreme difficulty in handling crisis in an organizational context, understanding a complex, living organization's mechanisms, while also attempting to navigate the changes such crisis has on those mechanisms in a way that will keep that organization alive.

Acting with decisive decision-making, despite the risks, may be one solution. Two examples from history will serve as a demonstration. Over 200 years ago, a colony of the British was in crisis by declaring independence from the strongest world power of the time. The conflict became known as the American Revolution. Early in the war, small wins became strong motivators for later battles on the American side. One such early win became known as the Battle of Princeton (1777). At a moment in the battle when the less experienced Americans were beginning to fall back in response to the experienced British soldiers consistent fire, George Washington rode on horseback to the front of the line and reportedly said, "Parade with us my brave fellows! There is but a handful of the enemy and we shall have them directly!" Washington then stayed in front and led the soldiers forward to as close as 30 yards to the British line, which would have been well within range of the British musket balls. Despite the extreme risk, Washington's bravery roused and stabilized the American line, eventually leading to the remains of the British force running away into the surrounding woods (see <https://www.mountvernon.org/george-washington/the-revolutionary-war/washingtons-revolutionary-war-battles/the-trenton-princeton-campaign/10-facts-about-the-battle-of-princeton/>).

Fast forward in time to September of 1940, Winston Churchill, who had only been British Prime Minister for a few months, instead of facing an army of scrawny inexperienced colonists, faced the war machine of the Germans. Having already taken France, the Germans, under the direction of Adolf Hitler, engaged in a devastating bombing of the British people, eventually killing more than 40,000 civilians. The morning after the night bombing campaign hit London for the first time, killing over 400 people in one night, Churchill traveled to the center of the destruction and with fires burning around him among the piles of rubble, wept openly at the devastation. Nevertheless, in a symbolic act of resilience, he took his large white handkerchief he had used to wipe his eyes in one hand and held his walking stick in the other and energized the crowd of people who were in an extremely desperate situation. Instead of leaving in the safe light of day, Churchill remained well into the evening with the people. Finally, at the constant urging of others, he left only when the fires around him served as visual targets for a new round of bombings in the area (Larson, 2020, pp. 215–217).

These two real-life events of action in extreme crisis demonstrate the strong influence organizational leadership has in the type of response an organization is willing to engage in response to a crisis. Although these two events in history serve as important examples for

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organizational leaders to follow, the purpose of this special issue was to go beyond the gleaming of insights from stories in history to presenting well-developed theory based on scientific evidence in order to provide interventions and solutions to managing crisis for those on the frontlines.

In the first article, Mithani and Kocoglu (this issue) use a comparative developmental approach to show how organizations are similar to individual humans in terms of evolutionary survival responses to extreme crisis. Continuing with a human development approach, Hinojosa, Shaine and McCauley (this issue) use an attachment theory approach to create a unique lens centered within the leader-follower relationship during crisis situations. Next, Norris, Casa de Calvo and Mather (this issue), continues with an interdisciplinary approach by offering the Evolutionary-Existential Model of Organizational Decision-Making. Clément and Roux-Dufort (this issue) extend the interdisciplinary approach even further, by using Greek tragedy from classic literature as an analytical lens for understanding decision-making and strategies for responding to crisis.

In a shift to a more skills-based approach, Thürmer, Wieber and Gollwitzer (this issue) offer collective implementation intentions as a way to improve managerial decision making under crisis. Coming from an opposite direction, Carson, Waddingham and Mackey (this issue) focus on the organizational members attributions of managerial crisis failure in order to encourage an awareness of situational challenges. Continuing with an attributional approach from a macro perceptive, Roberto and Sherman (this issue) examine the role of culture in the sensemaking narratives surrounding an organizational crisis.

Finally, in the last grouping of articles, Fox, Davis and Baucus (this issue) examine the relationships between the concepts of corporate social responsibility and authentic leadership in terms of flexibility in an organization's business model under crisis. While Tabesh and Vera (this issue) shift focus specifically to top management teams' improvisation decision making in crisis. Finally, Chou, Ramser, Chang and Han (this issue) transition back to organizational members to provide a theoretical model of helping in the context of organizational crisis. Oscar Hammerstein once said, "It is a modern tragedy that despair has so many spokesmen and hope so few." It is my hope that this special issue will provide valuable direction to management practitioners and scientist in the ever-evolving world we all live in.

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