Confronting wicked problems and creeping crises: Integrated crisis management

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Abstract

The disciplines of crisis management, emergency management, business continuity and resilience are at an inflection point. Is the work of professionals in these fields subject to what some have called at recent industry conferences a failure of imagination? Are the tried-and-true methods and activities serving practitioners as well as they always have, or does today's world demand something different? The more important question is: In these conditions, how can crisis leaders do the most good? To answer that question, crisis management professionals may consider shifting their emphasis from planning, training and exercising alone and introducing more explicit focus on the delivery of good decision making — in other words, a transition of emphasis from response planning to more strategic programme management. All crises — whether fast burning, slow burning or creeping — require decision making. Ultimately in the aftermath, organisations and their leaders are judged not only on the outcomes of a crisis response, but on the decisions they made. Furthermore, this judgment is made not only on whether the decisions were right or wrong alone, but also whether they were defensible based on the best available information at the time. In confrontation with these realities, there is a unique role for enterprise crisis teams to define a value proposition along a set of guiding principles. From there, operational execution may be bridged through an integrated crisis management framework. This paper proposes a way forward along these lines. This article is also included in ***The Business & Management Collection*** *which can be accessed at https://hstalks.com/business/.*

Keywords: crisis management, crisis leadership, creeping crisis, integrated crisis management, emergency management, Cynefin, resilience, business continuity, wicked problems

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INTRODUCTION

The disciplines of crisis management, emergency management, business continuity and resilience are at an inflection point. Is the work of professionals in these fields subject to what some have called at recent industry conferences a failure of imagination? Are the tried-and-true methods and activities serving practitioners as well as they always have, or does today's world demand something different?

There is a back-and-forth taking place between the effectiveness brought by modern high-performance resilience professionals (including those in crisis management, emergency management, business continuity, etc.), the breadth of risks facing today's global enterprises, and the set of expectations within organisations around what their capabilities are to respond to the unexpected. Among the effects of this dynamic are disagreement over the use of some common terms (eg what do we mean by 'resilience?'), uncertainty around the scope and applicability of 'resilience' practices, and some lack of uniformity around how resilience is implemented, especially in larger global enterprises. In general, there seems to be an expectation that practitioners in these fields are ready and able to respond to nearly any interruption.

There also is — or was — a belief that good outcomes in crisis response are necessarily the result of good plans. And there is a somewhat flawed corollary which suggests that, therefore, more and better planning will result in measurably better outcomes. There is also the more common logical error that more information, data and analysis will necessarily lead to better decisions.

Crisis management practitioners do not fall prey to these assumptions most of the time. Having responded to incidents of varying complexity and with varying levels of warning (or none at all), most recognise that plans alone are not enough in isolation. They will also recognise that well-crafted collaboration is far more influential on the outcome of responses, but that collaboration alone is not sufficient even with good planning. Even if the practitioners adopt a broader view, it is very often the case that their stakeholders have not.

Recent surveys and research in the post-COVID-19 era on the setup, design, implementation, acceptance and effectiveness of crisis management teams have shown some very interesting insights.

In assessing crisis management programmes across industries and organisations, it is very important to note that crisis management functions can take various shapes and forms to meet the needs of their clients and leaders. Smaller, leaner organisations may incorporate the function into existing enterprise services (such as legal, security and health and safety), whereas larger organisations may have fully fledged teams spread across a global footprint. Many of these larger organisations have invested heavily in tools, systems, people and expertise. Many also have direct experience in their corporate history with potentially catastrophic crises.

For this reason, it can be easier to examine the data about larger organisations to tease out insights that in some cases may have relevance more broadly.

CRISIS MANAGEMENT PROGRAMMES

In 2023, the Witt O'Brien's '10th Event Impact Management Report'[1] looked at event pre-planning and programme enhancements for organisations in the category of organisations that generate greater than US$20bn in gross revenue — in other words, large global enterprises with the wherewithal to resource crisis management programmes well and presumably with a fair amount of global risk exposure to real-world crisis events.

This data leads to some interesting insights about crisis teams in action at these levels. Survey respondents were asked to characterise a set of conditions according to the extent to which they presented a challenge to their crisis response. The answer choices in this case were: significant challenge, somewhat challenging, neutral, little challenge and no challenge.

A few of the conditions presented in the survey concerning crisis programmes and response effectiveness are paraphrased as follows:

- *'Lack of a defined crisis leader'*:[2] Almost 85 per cent of respondents said that the absence of a defined crisis leader was either little or no challenge. Surprisingly, for nearly 15 per cent of respondents in this category, there was in fact a challenge in terms of identifying a crisis leader.
- *'Clear process driver'*:[3] Here 67 per cent of respondents said that this was either little or no challenge. But for nearly a quarter of organisations, identifying someone to shepherd the crisis management process was a problem.
- *'Clarity on when a crisis management (CM) team is activated/notified'*:[4] For 44 per cent (almost half) this was a challenge — for some, a significant one (10 per cent).
- *'Muddled workstreams'*:[5] Almost all identified some form of challenge with regard to managing response actions and for many this was a significant challenge (14 per cent) or somewhat challenging (18 per cent).

The takeaway seems to be this. In actual response, most (but not all) of these large organisations have a process of some kind that they can deploy, and seemingly someone (designated or otherwise) who can rise to the occasion when a crisis occurs. There also seems, however, to be a lack of clarity around activation and notification, and a surprising degree of difficulty with coordinating response workstreams in response to an incident.

There are likely to be as many explanations as there are respondents to the survey, and these findings cannot be acted on in isolation. But as insights they offer an interesting starting point for discussion about how organisations implement their plans and protocols against real-world incidents.

The BCI's 'Crisis Management Report'[6] from October 2023 offers another perspective. This survey looked at over 300 crisis management programmes across 68 countries, 18 sectors and organisations of varying size, from less than ten employees to over 100,000. Some of the findings that stood out relate less to active response and more to positioning and values influencing the performance of crisis teams.

For instance, the BCI Survey finds:

- *'Crisis Management within organisations has become more centralised as a result of the pandemic'*:[7] This finding cites that 80 per cent of practitioners report some degree of centralisation of their programme, with 44 per cent fully centralised, and points to a slow upward trend since the COVID-19 pandemic.
- *'The siloing of information and lack of coordinated information control means organisational awareness of crisis plans is low'*:[8] The report cites that a plurality of respondents (~29 per cent) recognised that staff lacked awareness of crisis plans, which could lead to confusion in response.
- *'Adaptability and collaboration are the main lessons that organisations extracted from the COVID-19 pandemic experience'*:[9] In other words, survey respondents said

the main thing they learned from the pandemic experience was that plans need the ability to be quickly modified to suit changing circumstances (as well as a move toward outcome-based plans), and to address this most have increased training and exercising.

These BCI report findings suggest other dynamics at play. First, despite crisis management programmes becoming increasingly centralised — slightly more so every year — the effect of information siloing on such programmes persists. This leads to confusion in responses, communication challenges and a feeling that the crisis team is in a silo itself. Curiously, the variable emphasised in this survey finding seems to be 'awareness of crisis plans', suggesting that more awareness of plans will improve conditions. But that may not be the only lever that can be pulled. The emphasis on planning and plan design is continued in the context around the third finding on 'adaptability and collaboration', which recommends stakeholder management, risk mapping and reviewing communications systems,[10] but also overwhelmingly finds that planning, training and exercising more are the answer.

WHERE DO WE STAND?

The work of professionals in crisis management, emergency management, business continuity and resilience is more important now than it has ever been. In part, this is a function of the world we live in and the range of novel and emerging risks it presents. It may also be the case that emergency management, continuity and crisis professionals are increasingly being asked to address problems that would previously have been assigned to others, due to their proven effectiveness in solving unique challenges.

These circumstances are an opportunity and a significant challenge. The fact of the matter is, with limited resources they cannot be all things to all people. An increasing number of organisations are relying on their crisis and emergency management teams to coordinate responses to emerging challenges, and saying no is not an option. On the other hand, being invited or tasked to take on the most consequential problems facing an organisation — even if they are outside of our traditional scope — is a tremendous opportunity.

Under these conditions, the traditional tools of plans, planning, training and exercising are crucial. But are they enough?

The answer is no. At least, not alone. These traditional activities are now table stakes. Against the brand of wicked problems that we see today, plans and recent training will help, but they will not win the day. These products will earn practitioners a seat at the table. To do the most good, however, practitioners may need to think more broadly, more critically and be open to swimming in new lanes.

BLOCKING AND TACKLING

To be clear, foundational practices are indispensable for building an organisation's resilience. These core elements include establishing comprehensive crisis management plans, maintaining robust communication protocols and ensuring that crisis teams are well trained and exercised to act decisively. These basic preparedness measures are not mere formalities, they are the essential underpinnings that enable organisations to respond effectively when a crisis strikes.

The importance of these foundational activities is highlighted by their role in mitigating immediate risks and stabilising the organisation, allowing leaders to pivot towards more sophisticated, adaptive strategies as the situation evolves. This focus on the basics ensures that organisations are not just reactive but are strategically positioned to manage the complexities of modern crises.

For crisis management professionals, the refinement of fundamentals — through regular drills, scenario planning and clear delineation of roles and responsibilities — is a necessary step in maintaining organisational resilience in an increasingly volatile environment. It also confers credibility on the work crisis teams do that is harder to see plainly.

GETTING THE BASICS RIGHT

Achieving resilience in crisis management begins with getting those basics right that are critical to ensuring an organisation is not only prepared to handle crises effectively but can also thrive in the face of adversity.

Four essential building blocks of an effective crisis management strategy include the following:

(1) *Plans, protocols and procedures*: Traditionally, the cornerstone of any crisis management strategy is a comprehensive set of plans, protocols and procedures. These documents are written and revised to cover a wide range of potential scenarios, ensuring that the organisation has a clear roadmap for action. In practice, these plans are considered living documents, regularly reviewed and updated to reflect new risks, regulatory changes and lessons learned from past incidents. A proactive approach helps ensure that when a crisis occurs, the organisation can move swiftly, reducing the potential for confusion and inefficiency during the critical early stages of a response.

(2) *Training and exercising*: Even the best-designed plans are only as effective as the people who implement them. A disciplined training cycle and regular exercising of scenarios are foundational to embedding resilience into the organisation. This means conducting objective oriented simulations that challenge crisis teams to think on their feet and apply their knowledge under pressure. Exercises not only build the efficacy of the existing plans but also help identify gaps in knowledge or resources that need to be addressed and often highlight hidden assumptions. By regularly engaging in such drills, organisations ensure that their teams remain sharp, confident and ready to execute.

(3) *Established teams*: Established crisis management teams commonly consist of members with diverse skill sets, including crisis communication, operations, legal and cyber security, among others. Each member must have a clear understanding of their roles and responsibilities within the team, as well as how their work interfaces with other team members and departments. Furthermore, the team should have an ability to quickly onboard new members as the team inevitably rolls over. A designated crisis leader who can make decisive calls and guide the team through complex situations is critical, and this role should also be to serve as a guardian or shepherd of the overall crisis management framework. Building and maintaining teams requires ongoing investment in both training and team-building activities to foster trust and collaboration.

(4) *Baseline communications capability*:[11] Effective communication is central to crisis management. Establishing a baseline communications capability means having the tools, processes and protocols in place to ensure that accurate information flows quickly and seamlessly both within the organisation

and externally to stakeholders. This includes having pre-prepared communication templates, a centralised communication command centre and channels for reaching all relevant audiences, including employees, customers, regulators and the media. Speed and clarity of communication can significantly influence the outcome, making communications one of the most critical aspects of the crisis response.

These four key areas — plans, training, teams and communications — form a strong foundation for resilience, and at one time would have been considered the full aperture of crisis management. In confrontation with today's wicked problems, however, this is not enough. For crisis leaders and crisis teams that seek readiness — and think of themselves as crisis teams that deliver enduring value — the foundational activities are table stakes. These activities provide an entry point for a conversation with enterprise leaders. They are the reference point to a value proposition that may have outlived its usefulness, but that nevertheless matters to a team's credibility. Having achieved that credibility and gained the invitation to the table, what next? How does the crisis management discipline advance beyond these basics, should it, and if so, why?

WHY DOES IT MATTER?

For the most part, today's multinational enterprises and even large and medium-sized organisations have become quite good at prevention, detection and response to threats of all kinds. There are now a range of tools available to support these efforts, and the approach is similar across disciplines. This is true not just among crisis management professionals, but also health and safety teams, security leaders and even compliance, risk management, operations and supply chain experts. Large investments into the infrastructure of prevention, detection and response also tend to lead to robust internal control systems, audit capabilities and associated programmes.

While these tendencies are not new, a more recent phenomenon is that most of these organisations have now honed and refined these activities in response to many of the acute shocks to the global economy over the last five years, including the COVID-19 pandemic, global conflicts, unpredictable economic conditions and a range of other exogenous factors. While the honing and refining of tools is inherently good, a consequence may be that many of these activities are becoming siloed within organisations. This may explain the patterns in some of the recent surveys. It also suggests that organisations may not be best positioned to cope with the wicked problems that underlie the acute shocks they keep experiencing. To resolve the discrepancy, crisis and emergency management teams are increasingly called upon to tackle unstructured problems, usually with component parts that are well outside their remit, incomplete, contradictory or subject to change — all while also reacting to ongoing incidents in the normal course of business.

There is a confusing disconnect between the causes of problems, their unique effects on an enterprise, and defining how to deal with these effects.

For crisis management practitioners, the solution will not be found in more and better plans, more training and exercising and more communication activity. These are all necessary and helpful, but alone they are not enough. When new problems interact with other problems, resulting in a system of interrelated problems, the emphasis for crisis practitioners in these conditions should be on delivering the best possible decision making to their stakeholders.

WICKED PROBLEMS

In 1973, design theorists and sociologists Hort Rittel and Melvin Webber published their foundational paper, 'Dilemmas in a General Theory of Planning',[12] which has had lasting impact on the fields of planning, policy making and systems thinking. In this work, Rittel and Webber defined the characteristics of what they call 'wicked problems'. Responding to the pressures of complex social and political issues at the time, the authors argued that traditional, linear approaches to solving such problems were inadequate. Some problems in business, for example, may be considered 'tame'[13] because they can be managed through the delegation of processes to a set of skilled subordinates, whereas other problems are clearly 'critical' and cannot be managed. These problems required 'commanders', ie decisive individuals who could provide the answer to the problem and coerce others, where necessary, to ensure the collective good. But what about problems that are neither tame nor critical? Those for which an entirely different kind of leadership would be required?

In 1973, Rittel and Webber looked at a global environment in which the impact of environmental pollution was becoming more evident, where social and economic inequality were taking on greater policy importance, and where urban renewal and planning were gaining prominence. Such broad, hairy challenges were defined as 'wicked problems' and are recognised by having of some of the following characteristics:[14]

- No definitive formulation.
- No stopping rule.
- Solutions are 'better' or 'worse', not true or false.
- No immediate, ultimate test of a solution.
- Every solution is a 'one-shot operation'; no trial and error.
- No set of operations that may be incorporated into a plan.
- Every wicked problem is essentially unique.
- Every wicked problem is a symptom of another problem.
- The explanation for the problem determines the resolution.
- The planner has no right to be wrong.

Despite originating in 1973, these characteristics are frighteningly familiar in today's world. In 2025, we have our share of wicked problems: climate change, access to healthcare, global migration and changing demographics, and the loss of trust in institutions. For Rittel and Weber, these challenges require broader thinking than routine management can provide and are so expansive in scope that it is difficult even for the most well-intentioned 'commander' to meaningfully direct. Wicked problems require a kind of leadership that can recognise its own limitations and allow for a flexible, iterative and collaborative style.

There is no doubt that today's enterprises are contending with wicked problems, not just on a macro-policy level, but in an actual, operational sense as well. The wicked problems of the current era cast their effects on enterprises in surprising ways, just as changing weather patterns test supply chains in new ways, sudden shifts in demographics create uncertainty for local governments, and the proliferation of misinformation requires business to react to threats that are difficult to forecast.

It is also worth pointing out that people and infrastructure tend to be most resilient to the risks they are most accustomed to. In practice, this means that when an earthquake strikes in New Jersey, or a tornado touches down in Cape Cod, or a hurricane crosses Los Angeles into the Nevada desert, the people and things in the path of those risks are far more surprised and far less prepared than they are for the risks on the ordinary menu. Crisis leaders need to be mindful of this when calibrating their responses to these kinds of events.

In part, what makes addressing the causes of these challenges so difficult is that no one leader, organisation or country owns the whole problem, or the solution, and the problems themselves defy traditional planning. Specifically in the context of crisis management, there is the added urgency to respond to however the circumstances are acutely affecting a specific enterprise in the shortest time possible.

FROM WICKED PROBLEMS TO WICKED ASSUMPTIONS: THE LIMITS OF PLANNING VERSUS COMPLEXITY

As if the wicked problems and their unpredictable risks were not enough, there is also the possibility that our leaders and stakeholders have an incomplete or outdated understanding of the crisis management capabilities within their organisations. In other words, the work of crisis management leaders is evolving and the kinds of crises they are being called upon to support are materially more complex and often unfamiliar in their characteristics. At the same time, however, the expectations of our leaders and stakeholders may not have caught up.

In the 2017 article, 'The Politics of Crisis Management', Dr Arjen Boin *et al.* point out that 'the traditional perspective cast crisis management as a technocratic activity that is effective when a combination of tasks is accomplished'.[15] Traditional approaches favour linear problem solving and command/control. Hypothetically, then, the following assumptions would be true when a crisis strikes:[16]

- The emerging crisis is swiftly detected.
- Responders understand what is happening.
- The efforts of responders are orchestrated.
- The organisation communicates with its workers, customers, etc.
- Critical decisions are made by the right people.
- The aftermath of a crisis is marked by proper accountability and lessons learned.

Of course these are excellent criteria for crisis response, but most crisis leaders will acknowledge that most of these characteristics are not present as crises become more complex and multifaceted. The challenge for today's crisis leaders may also be that their constituents still expect them to deliver on commitments like these, which are increasingly hard to meet.

In his more recent research, Boin helps to resolve the discrepancy between challenges rooted in wicked problems and the perception of what crisis teams are capable of by introducing the notion of the 'creeping crisis'.[17]

In defining the problem confronting today's crisis management practitioners, one finds the broad global wicked problems, which themselves are too big and unstructured for individual teams or groups to manage, as well as the individual sub-problems and issues they cast off, and which also need to be handled. At the same time, the assumptions about crisis responders and their capabilities may not be keeping pace with actual capabilities.

These conditions raise questions about how best to organise crisis management programmes at all levels of enterprises.

THE CREEPING CRISIS

Boin's research has brought clarity to gaps in traditional definitions of crisis conditions. Fast-burning crises are the most commonly thought of and easily recognised. They come as a surprise, are understood as discrete events, are unique in some way, and there is unlikely to be any disagreement about their existence and status as a crisis. They are obvious, they have a beginning and an end, and they command attention. Slow-burning crises, by contrast, will 'simmer' for extended periods in incubation. They may lack any clearly defined beginning or end, and often persevere in a cooler phase after intermittent 'hot' phases.[18]

The concept of 'creeping crisis' is a device Boin and his researchers use to identify crises that resemble slow burners, but with several important differences. Even more than other forms of crisis, creeping crises are born from real or perceived threats to societal values or life-sustaining systems (such as critical infrastructure, critical IT systems, financial markets and transport networks), and are often associated with 'precursor events'.[19] Most significantly, they fail to attract the attention of authorities or leadership and, as a result, are partly or inadequately responded to. This lack of attention is a key marker of the creeping crisis and tends to occur at the leadership level, as well in the media and among members of the public.

Creeping crises may be derived from the kinds of broader wicked problems discussed above. They are characterised by an absence of attention on the part of decision makers; a long, slow developmental period with a strong likelihood of precursor events; and their ability to propagate unnoticed, especially through tightly coupled systems in complex organisations. It is unlikely that stakeholders to creeping crises will clearly agree on the existence of the crisis or what, if anything, to do about it. Consequently, these crises have no clear beginning or end and lack any form of convergence around the approach to resolving them.

As an example, the wicked problem of global healthcare inequity or access to healthcare may create conditions in which creeping crises can incubate, for instance, the proliferation of antimicrobial resistance in global populations. Other examples of contemporary creeping crises may include the WannaCry ransomware attack, migration and border security at the level of local government, or even consequences of the merger of artificial intelligence (AI) and big data in enterprise platforms.[20]

THE MANAGEMENT PROBLEM OF CREEPING CRISIS FOR PRACTITIONERS

It is a common cliché in the business to refer to a crisis or incident response life cycle on a timeline in which events may be seen as either left or right of the proverbial 'bang'. This analogy is helpful in differentiating planning and prevention from response, and in making the point that certain activities should be brought as far left of bang as possible. But what if there is no 'bang'? What if instead no one observed anything — or worse, some people did, but the decision-making chain will not or cannot acknowledge it? This is why creeping crises are uniquely problematic for crisis practitioners.

There are essentially four aspects to this challenge from a programme management perspective. First, the ownership problem[21] reflects the reality that creeping crises and their precursors are unlikely to fall clearly within the purview of individual owners, in part because they do not qualify as full-blown crises or as agreed-upon risks that are articulated in a risk management process. Because the information around creeping crises tends to be ambiguous, it is also difficult to articulate a meaningful call to action in a strategic decision-making context. Since the problem is poorly defined and not widely acknowledged, it is not clear what decisions need to be made by whom, when and why. These conditions defy rational problem-solving approaches and challenge the goal of early and prudent escalation.

The next problem is one of detection.[22] Traditionally, crisis management experts seek to see around corners, scan the horizon and anticipate new or percolating threats. This work is challenging enough in the context of familiar responses. When it comes to creeping crises, their embedded nature, especially in tightly coupled systems, makes them hard to recognise in their incubation period. Very few experts will have the right combination of system understanding, access and strategic context to recognise that a deviation may be part of a broader trend slowly leading to a crisis for an enterprise. One the one hand, such long incubation periods can create many opportunities for data collection and intervention. On the other hand, until the circumstances tip from creeping into disaster, on what basis can action be taken?

This leads to the third problem: intervention.[23] Sometimes problems simmer in the background and go away on their own (or at least some leaders may choose to believe this is the case). Post-disaster, the call for intervention will be obvious and overwhelming. But in the incubation stages, proactive intervention which comes too early can actually be counterproductive. It will likely be unclear who should lead the intervention, what action needs to be taken, and how those actions should be calibrated in the absence of agreement that a high-stakes situation is at hand. Since the problem has no clear owner, is difficult to detect or articulate, and defies calls for intervention; it also poses significant decision-making challenges.

These challenges manifest the fourth problem: response management.[24] The creeping crisis will often spin off precursor events — smaller, isolated problems or sub-crises that foreshadow the future 'big' problem. One would expect that today's skilled enterprise crisis teams could be called upon to handle these — probably easily. In doing so, these teams may respond to single events or small patterns of events globally which are likely to give crisis managers some insight into the underlying problem. A pattern whereby an unacknowledged creeping crisis casts off precursors may require the organisation to think about who should be responding over time, and as each problem is addressed, further issues may be gradually uncovered. All of this can create a high volume of work for crisis teams caught in the middle. The real problem then becomes one of how best to manage a sustainable response over the long term.

BEYOND TABLE STAKES: A BROADER SET OF GUIDING PRINCIPLES

In a world of wicked problems, wicked assumptions and creeping crises, do the tools and practices considered to be industry standard still serve crisis teams well? Survey data on the performance of such teams seems to show a disconnect. Why?

The more important question is: in these conditions, how can crisis leaders do the most good?

To answer that question, crisis management professionals may consider shifting their emphasis from plans, planning, training and exercising alone and introduce more explicit focus on the delivery of good decision making — in other words, a transition of emphasis from response planning to more strategic programme management. All crises, whether fast-burning, slow-burning or creeping, require decision making. Ultimately in the aftermath, organisations and their leaders are judged not only on the outcomes of a crisis response, but on the decisions they made. Furthermore, this judgment is made not only on whether the decisions were right or wrong alone, but also whether they were defensible based on the best available information at the time.

In confrontation with these realities, there is a unique role for enterprise crisis teams to define a value proposition along these guiding principles:

(1) To lead with positive adaptation and recognise crises as a form of change.
(2) To deliver a comprehensive map of the landscape (in an unstructured, ambiguous environment).
(3) To provide coordination that can bring the right players together at the right time in the right context.
(4) To create space in which decisions can be tested for necessity, proportion, legality, ethics and consistency with organisational values.
(5) And to do so in a steady and repeatable manner.

INTEGRATED CRISIS MANAGEMENT AS A STRATEGIC FRAMEWORK

To bridge these guiding principles with operational execution, a strategic framework for crisis leaders may be called for.

The proposal outlined above implies a shift in how crisis management is typically approached. The traditional focus on plans and preparedness, while foundational, does not sufficiently address the dynamic and complex nature of modern crises characterised by ambiguity and rapid change. What is needed is not just a set of plans, but a rubric for coordinating effective decision making under pressure.

This is where the concept of integrated crisis management comes into play. The concept rests on the notion that crisis management in these conditions needs to be fundamentally a sense-making, meaning-making effort. It should start from the idea that the data and information about crises will precede the model used to resolve them, and those models may need to be new, purpose-built, specific to the context and not necessarily reusable. What is repeatable, however, is the strategy around arriving at the new, necessary model.

One of the most helpful tools for crisis leaders to refer to in deriving a response model from a set of unstable, uncertain conditions with incomplete data is the Cynefin framework.[25] This concept has a long history of application across a variety of domains. What will stand out most for crisis practitioners, however, is its usefulness in quickly characterising sets of issues and their corresponding stakeholders according to the extent to which the cause-and-effect relationship exists and can be known.

In the world of creeping crises and wicked problems, the cause-and-effect relationship can only be understood in retrospect and is often an emergent property of the character of the response itself and the decisions that are made. Where a crisis exists in a system without causality — which most do — so-called best practices will not apply (referred to as the 'clear' context in the Cynefin framework). Elements of the response or solution may be derived from such best practices, and therefore can and should be delegated away from the central crisis team to the owners of those practice areas. Likewise, there are also conditions where expert counsel is required to interpret or understand the cause-and-effect relationship (referred to as the 'complicated' context in the Cynefin framework).

While expert analysis is necessary to qualify information in the complicated context, the reality is that more than one correct or acceptable solution may be possible. In fact, a range of proposed solutions may be available over which the expert class may debate fiercely, but which are actually equally acceptable from a broader leadership perspective. In these circumstances, crisis teams may be best suited to delegate the discussion away from the crisis response and urge the experts to return with a unified proposal; or the crisis team may be best suited to acknowledge the similarity of proposals and select the best one based on their assessment.

This leaves the 'complex' context (as defined in the Cynefin framework), wherein good leaders will recognise that there is no absolute right or wrong, and there is no apparent cause or effect. Such 'complexity' leaders will recognise that in order to navigate the situation, experimentation and iteration will be necessary. This means, at an organisational level, plotting small, frequent steps, sensing the response in the system, and responding. With each step, the team can adjust accordingly, dampening or amplifying as needed. Progress is made and measured by sensing patterns that emerge from this process, and since there is no absolute right answer, the stakeholders to the crisis will determine what good looks like.

It turns out that in practice, common crisis management activities can be coordinated according to the four Cynefin framework contexts (clear, complicated, complex and chaos):

(1) *Build plans for 'chaos'*: Establish direct command protocols for minimum basic functions, according to best practices accepted in traditional crisis management. Where chaos is present (ie no relationship between cause and effect exists), direct command authority is the best approach, and simple, concise, repeatable protocols are necessary.
(2) *Train the 'complicated'*: Practise integrating subject matter experts into time-bound decisions. Crisis teams should become adept at managing a stable of small to medium enterprises (SMEs) and develop capabilities around bringing their expertise to bear in ways that are maximally constructive for the objectives of the crisis leaders.
(3) *Delegate the 'clear'*: Whether a crisis is creeping or even raging, some aspects of the enterprise should still function normally. Not everything needs to be reinvented or adapted in crisis response. Things that are not malfunctioning, not interrupted and not under threat should be able to continue within reason. This can be very helpful to a crisis team that is already busy resolving unknown unknowns, and elements of the response that can be continued based on standard best practices should continue and not distract from the overall response.
(4) *Orchestrate 'complexity'*: The most challenging aspect of the response will occur within the 'complex' context as described above, and the crisis team should focus most of its effort on the orchestration, leadership or nurturing of the decision making that can occur here.

In this way, integrated crisis management can be thought of as a strategic framework with the goal of clarifying cause/effect and identifying controls that can be applied to emerging trends in the here-and-now, in the service of good decision making.

It serves as a strategic framework that builds upon the core values we have identified: adaptation, comprehensive understanding, coordinated action, ethical decision making and consistency. By integrating controls on emerging trends and immediate situations, this approach enhances the decision-making capabilities of crisis leaders, allowing them to act more strategically and effectively.

In essence, integrated crisis management does not replace the traditional tools but complements and elevates them, ensuring that crisis teams are not only prepared but are also adaptable, proactive and aligned with organisational values in real time. This strategic enhancement ensures that decisions made during crises are not only defensible and informed but also align with the broader objectives of organisational resilience and growth.

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