Out-of-the-box thinking for crisis managers
By Ron Kuban, PhD

Understandably, the term “crisis” conjures powerful images and elicits strong emotions. Yet, “crisis management” (or the management of crisis) is often treated either as a reflection of routine management practices, or as an accelerated last-minute effort to overcome a surprise occurrence. Effective crisis management is neither routine nor haphazard, and demands a paradigm shift towards unique out-of-the-box thinking and planning.

Crises are abnormal and unique events, which occur with some degree of surprise to demand unusual, extensive, taxing and multi-jurisdictional response effort. Unfortunately, many individuals who confront these events, particularly at organizational or communal level, are unclear or misinformed about the composition and requirements of such events. In their effort to manage their crisis event they erroneously revert to the same paradigm they use for their day-to-day operations. Consequently, their effort produces inappropriate or delayed response, collateral damage, escalated costs, and increased liability.

The nature of crises is very different from that of emergency or disaster situations. The latter situations typically involve an identified agent (e.g., nature driven, technological failure, or human induced), and are focused on the tactical-level response to it. Crises, on the other hand, are more likely to have ill-defined cause or agent, and the response effort to them is typically more focused on strategic, management, or meta-structure issues. As a result, those at corporate board rooms and operation centers are more likely to focus on the crisis than the emergency, which may have generated it.

The progress of organizations (e.g., groups, corporations, or communities) into crisis may be fast — perhaps following devastating media coverage — or slow, such as when small incidents incrementally erode confidence to the point of failure. Regardless of the onset, the results are the same. Crises place affected organizations into parallel reality. On the one hand they must continue their routine existence with its related activities, processes, outputs, and life-patterns. On the other hand, they must respond immediately under adverse conditions where uncertainty and chaos are closely coupled.

Typically, there is much that remains shrouded in uncertainty and can change quickly — the cause of the situation, its impact or consequences, likely resolution strategies, key stakeholders, needed/available resources, key messages, and much more. Furthermore, chaos sometimes exceeds imaginable levels, thanks to a perceived need for action under tight timelines, the threat of escalation (i.e., risk, damage), and the often-uncoordinated response by a diversity of stakeholders. These are guaranteed to further aggravate the situation, unless managed effectively.

The most significant goal of crisis management is to return the affected organization to normal. Given that crises are life-altering events for both individuals and organizations, the return to normal does not mean a return to the way things were before the event. Nevertheless, the desired target is the return to some sort of *normalcy*. But, what is it?

Every person, family unit, organization, or community has its own pattern of life, which varies from day to day depending on the day of the week, workday (or school day) versus holiday, and so on. However, collectively these *patterns* provide each of us with a *routine*, which in turn provides us *predictability* and a *sense of control* over our life. We generally know or have strong expectation regarding what will happened today, tomorrow, or the next day. In a crisis, that predictability and its related sense of comfort are gone.

Crisis management strives to restore predictability, and requires the management of four important facets of the crisis environment: Chaos, uncertainty, perception, and time.

- The *management of chaos* involves the coordination of information, resources, and activities to ensure the most appropriate, timely, and efficient use of these valuable elements of the operation. The *management of uncertainty* strives to provide greater accuracy, integrity, and meaning regarding the event.
- The *management of perception* allows the affected organization to mould, develop, or coach the perception (and related emotions) of the public or key stakeholders regarding the event and its consequence.
- The *management of time* addresses the need for urgency and the setting of countless competing priorities that are inherent to crises.

One of the main causes for the failure of crisis management is that it is applied within traditional management and organizational behavior concepts. These are the wrong paradigm for crisis management!

After more than 70 years, the research into management practices and organizational behavior has generated an extensive literature, which serves us well in day-to-day operations. It describes organizations as individual entities, each with a life force of its own and a general desire to sustain its existence at all costs.

Organizations exist, survive and grow by establishing a unique identity, and sustaining their independence by establishing and promoting their own culture, language, practices, operational venue, and staff members. They define or mark all that is theirs through logo and other branding, uniforms, and language (i.e., terminology). Even when their operations require them to be mobile (i.e., traveling salespersons), organizations still clearly identify their 'turf' through marks on their vehicles, sub-offices, products, or personnel.

Organizations may well be viewed as a series of boxes — gear boxes. Each its own boundary or operational space, within which its clearly identified personnel, perform designated processes, promoting the health and well being of the entire organization. Large organizations are in effect a collection of smaller 'gear boxes' interconnected through their respective gears to run the whole.

One of the greatest complications in the management of crisis is that it really occurs outside the usual 'box'. Organizations that are affected by crisis suddenly find themselves drawn out of their comfort zone. This affects their personnel, material resources, finances, operational roles and responsibilities, mandate, operational venue, and so on. In short, what made them unique before is now being challenged to integrate, coordinate, share, or adapt for the sake of a larger whole — all in the name of crisis management. That is a tall order, and for some an impossible boundary to cross because it challenges their sense of identity. Acting defensively, they draw a curtain against any effort to ‘share’, collaborate, or coordinate.

Organizations affected by crisis need to continue thinking of themselves as independent gearboxes. As best as possible, and despite the crisis, they must continue to maintain the traditional purpose of the organization and its output.

At the same time, these organizations must also prepare for their other reality — crisis management — establishing a new offshoot sub-unit that would handle the crisis on behalf of the organization. The purpose of this extra ‘gearbox’ (or transformer) is to restore life to normal as soon as possible. And to do so effectively, it must literally think and operate outside-the-box.

In all likelihood, this unit may have to physically relocate outside the property boundaries of their organization, locating itself with other stakeholders. They would likely be tasked with unfamiliar roles and responsibilities, and use resources that are not part of their normal duties. They would interact with people who perform unfamiliar responsibilities or represent new jurisdictions. They would use language that would be unique to the event or to the management of crisis, and have to translate it when communicating to their parent organization.

Continuing with the gearbox analogy, when a crisis management sub-unit of one organization links to the crisis management sub-unit of another, they are apt to form their own temporary gearbox. This newly established linkage is necessary, and should be encouraged. It does not overcome the linkage that each has to its parent unit. Rather, it facilitates coordination without losing organizational integrity. Integration, instead of the assimilation of one organization by another, is the key to success. Assimilation, even if only for the duration of a crisis, threatens the independence and survival of organizations causing them to limit their involvement or cooperation.

Given that an organization’s crisis management team is expected to operate outside the box, what of the people who lead it? I would identify the following desirable traits:

- Ability to operate without a rule book. Crisis managers are best if they are able to manage events without over-reliance on rule books, overly descriptive plans, or detailed policies
- Ability to makes decisions ‘on the fly’. The key is adaptability in the face of rapidly (and possibly drastically) changing environment
- Copes with and accepts unpredictability as the operational norm, acting as a risk taker willing to try things without fear of failure
- Is an accomplished communicator
- Not necessarily the most senior person in the organization

In short, crises are unique and demanding events that draw an organization out of its comfort zone. These are events that may not have a clear agent or a cause, and yet have the potential to shake an organization or a community to its core. Successful crisis management returns the affected organization or community to some form of stability, normalcy, or predictable life pattern. To do so, it needs to allow an organizational off-shoot – its crisis management team, to venture outside normal practices and manage the event from outside the box.

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