

Chapter 15

Crisis Identification and Aversion Scale: Crisis Leadership Competencies – Pre–Crisis Stages

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ABSTRACT

This chapter describes a new instrument that measures a leader's ability to identify and avert crisis in the pre-crisis stages. There is currently no other instrument that measures leadership ability pre-crisis but rather only leadership attributes during the crisis event. Based on the conceptual model developed by Wooten and James, the measurement focuses on the first two stages of the conceptual model, signal detection and prevention and preparation. This chapter covers multiple aspects of the measurement. First, it provides the framework for the development of the crisis identification and aversion tool. Secondly, it provides an analysis of the inclusive quartiles of the three-factor measurement, which includes the competencies of participatory management, sensemaking, and resourcefulness.

INTRODUCTION

This past year, the pandemic has forced organizational leaders into a crisis or series of crises. Organizations shifted to remote work, business continuity managers moved plans into action, human resource departments began investigations about COVID related cases, and leaders made decision after decision about reduction of force, options for balancing the budget, and what the future would look like in their industry in the short-term and the long-term. Mass layoffs and closures began to occur only a few weeks into the pandemic (Bartik et al., 2020). From a crisis leadership perspective, no leader was immune to the pandemic and the havoc it wreaked on the workplace. Pearson and Mitroff (1993) characterize a crisis as a high-impact event with high ambiguity in cause, effect, and resolution.

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While this pandemic was not organizationally generated, it required a new set of competencies for leaders to succeed (Blythe, 2014). Bonvillian (2013) and DuBrin (2013) stated that leadership competencies during normal business operations differ from the competencies needed to lead through a crisis. Furthermore, leaders need to expect to lead through an organizational crisis within their professional careers (Klann, 2003). According to the Institute for Crisis Management, 50% of all crises occur due to management error or failure to take action. However, Klann (2013) also suggests that a leader can reduce the negative impact of the crisis. While it is common to bring in the public relations expert to manage the crisis, Blythe (2014) disagrees with this approach, arguing that the public relations expert be partnered with the leadership team navigating the crisis. Therefore, there is a great need to understand the competencies that create effective crisis leaders in the pre-crisis stages so that whenever possible, a crisis can be averted.

This chapter focuses on scale development to measure a leader's ability to identify and avert a crisis before the crisis event. It builds on Wooten and James' (2008) conceptual model, which identifies key competencies in each stage of a crisis. DeVellis (2012) provides an eight-step process for developing a scale: 1) determine what will be measured, 2) generate an item pool, 3) determine the format for measurement, 4) have initial item pool reviewed by experts, 5) consider the inclusion of validation items, 6) administer items to a development sample, 7) evaluate the items, and 8) optimize scale length.

BACKGROUND

Mitroff (2004), Fink (1986), and Wooten and James (2008) postulate that there are stages of crisis that expand beyond the actual event. Mitroff (2004) describes it as four stages, including signal detection, preparation and prevention, damage control and containment, and business recovery. Wooten and James (2008) add a fifth stage, called learning and redesign. Fink (1986) described four stages of a crisis, which he identifies as the anatomy of a crisis: the prodromal crisis stage, the acute crisis stage, the chronic crisis stage, and the crisis resolution stage. This literature supports that a crisis event is not the only aspect of a crisis, but rather there are pre-and post-crisis stages that must be considered.

Furthermore, Mitroff (2004) and Wooten and James (2008) postulate that crisis leaders focus on crisis identification and aversion, and when aversion is not possible, crisis leaders focus on developing an organization that is more resilient and stronger post-crisis. That said, the increase in organizational crises over the past couple of decades is human-induced, thus creating an opportunity for leaders to prevent a crisis from occurring (Pearson & Mitroff, 1993). A recent study showed that 50% of leaders believe their role in the crisis is to minimize damage and get back to business as usual (DuBrin, 2013). There has been little research on crisis leader competencies and even less on competencies needed to lead successfully through all stages of a crisis (Bonvillian, 2013). There is currently no other instrument that measures leadership ability pre-crisis or post-crisis but rather only leadership attributes during the crisis event.

Leaders are often critiqued for how they led through a crisis because the expectation is that they will lead successfully (Bonvillian, 2013). However, when a leader does not lead effectively through a crisis, public reactions and brand management become increasingly important because the leader has not met the expectation placed on them (Bonvillian, 2013; James & Wooten, 2005; Pearson & Mitroff, 1993). The news highlights these leadership errors. Examples include Pennsylvania State University's football coach and the child molestation scandal, the Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University mass shooting which led to 32 deaths, the delayed Ford and Firestone recall of the tires leading to deaths and

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