



Entering new territory: A study of internal crisis management and crisis communication in organizations

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to present and discuss some of the main findings from a large survey of internal crisis management and crisis communication conducted in the spring of 2011 among public and private organizations in Denmark (the ICMCC survey). The survey was conducted among the 367 largest private companies (selected from DK 1000, established by Børsen business magasin) and among 98 public organizations (municipalities). The overall goal was to get a preliminary idea of how these companies or organizations perceive, plan, coordinate and implement internal crisis management and crisis communication activities before, during and after a crisis. The survey questionnaire comprised 36 questions and was sent to respondents who typically are responsible for the crisis-preparedness of their organizations. The results from the survey show that the vast majority of organizations have a crisis or contingency plan, and most of these plans contain an internal dimension relating to the management and communication with the internal stakeholders during a crisis. Thus, the study shows a rather professional and formalized behavior towards crisis management in general, but also when it comes to managing a crisis in relation to the internal organizational stakeholders in specific. In addition, the results clearly indicate a strong relation between organizational size and crisis management; the larger the organization the more likely to have a crisis plan. This particularly pertained to the private organizations. The ICMCC survey forms part of a major collaborative research project, financed by the Danish Council for Independent Research/Social Sciences (2011–2014), entitled Internal Crisis Management and Crisis Communication in Danish Organizations. The purpose of this three-year long project is to shed light upon the role of internal crisis management and crisis communication before, during and after an organizational crisis and/or a societal crisis leading to downsizing or major changes within an organization or an organizational field.

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1. Introduction

To create organizational commitment and identification is one of the important challenges for internal communication in private and public organizations. However, the challenge seems to grow bigger when the organization finds itself in a crisis situation. Studies have shown that employees, who used to be proud of their organization, change their perception of the organization according to crisis type (product recall, mismanagement, rumors, etc.), and the manager's handling of the crisis situation (cf. Aggerholm, 2009; Mansour-Cole & Scott, 1998).

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Within the last decade or so, crisis communication researchers have primarily focused on the external dimension of crisis communication, that is, the crisis response strategies applied by an organization after a crisis in an attempt to restore or protect its image and/or reputation among external stakeholders (Benoit, 1995; Coombs, 1999; Johansen & Frandsen, 2007). However, we still know only very little about what is going on inside an organization in crisis (cf. Frandsen & Johansen, 2011). Apart from a few exceptions as for instance research studies in *crisis sensemaking* in continuation of Karl Weick's seminal article "Enacted sensemaking in crisis situations" (1988), the organization internal dimension of crises, crisis management and crisis communication have by and large been unexplored.

The studies conducted within the field of crisis sensemaking are first and foremost characterized by qualitative case studies with the purpose of examining how organizational members create meaning at an organizational micro-level as a crisis unfolds in various contexts, or how sensemaking takes place at a societal macro-level at the end of a crisis through the study of reports and other documents from public inquiries.

The purpose of this paper is different. With this paper we want to present and discuss the main findings from a large, quantitative survey of internal crisis management and crisis communication conducted in the spring of 2011 among public and private organizations in Denmark by a group of researchers at ASB Center for Corporate Communication, Aarhus University. The survey is termed the Internal Crisis Management and Crisis Communication Survey (hereafter: the ICMCC survey). More specifically, the aim of the survey is to answer how middle managers, who are knowledgeable about and responsible for the internal crisis management and/or crisis communication function in private and public organizations *perceive* the following four areas:

- (a) *Organizational crises in general* (including experiences of previous crises).
- (b) The typical *patterns of reaction* and the typical *perception of causes, development and consequences* in crisis situations among the organizations' top and middle managers as well as employees (among these: the impact of factors such as type of crisis, job function and educational background).
- (c) The *formal crisis-preparedness* within the organization classified into (1) internal crisis management (e.g. formulated crisis management plans, crisis management teams and other proactive steps taken to handle in particular the internal crisis dimension) and (2) internal crisis communication (e.g. communication channels, appointment of internal spokespersons, communication from top and middle management as well as the role of the news media).
- (d) The *quality of the organizations' formal internal crisis-preparedness* and *the need* to improve this crisis-preparedness.

As mentioned above, such a comprehensive, empirical study of the internal dimensions of crises, crisis management and crisis communication within organizations has never been conducted before. General surveys of the crisis-preparedness of private and/or public organizations have already been conducted (cf. Frandsen & Johansen, 2004), but nobody has so far brought up the crucial question: How do organizations deal with the organization internal dimension?

The paper consists of six sections. First, the literature on internal crisis management and crisis communication is reviewed. Second, we make a general introduction to the collaborative research project, financed by the Danish Council for Independent Research/Social Sciences (2011–2014), entitled *Internal Crisis Management and Crisis Communication in Danish Organizations*, which the survey is part of. Third, the theoretical framework and the research questions of the ICMCC survey are briefly presented. Fourth, the research design is explained, and fifth, we present selected results. Finally, we discuss the results with specific reference to the correlations between internal crisis management/crisis communication, on one hand, and factors such as organizational size and having a crisis management plan/a crisis management team, on the other. We conclude with a few statements concerning the limitations of the study and implications for future research.

2. Literature review

According to the European Communication Monitor, a survey conducted on an annual basis in a large number of European countries by the European Public Relations Education and Research Association (www.euprera.org) in collaboration with the European Association of Communication Directors (EACD) and the *Communication Director Magazine*, two of the disciplines or fields of practice that the respondents expect will gain importance in the future, are *internal communication* and *crisis communication*. In the first European Communication Monitor, conducted in 2007, 1087 communication professionals from 22 countries were asked: "How important are the following fields of practice in your organization? Will they gain more or less importance within the next three years?" Thirty-four percent of the respondents answered that internal communication was an important field of practice in 2007, and 69% expected the discipline to gain importance in 2010. Similarly, 35% of the respondents answered that crisis communication was an important field of practice in 2007, and 58% expected the discipline to gain importance in 2010 (Zerfass, Van Ruler, Rogojinaru, Vercic, & Hamrefors, 2007, p. 13). In spite of the expected importance, the combination of these two disciplines or fields of practice, that is, *internal crisis communication* (defined as the communicative interaction among managers and employees, in a private or public organization, before, during and after an organizational or societal crisis) is still an under-researched area.

Although factors of relevance for the study of the organization internal dimension of crises are touched upon now and then in the literature, this sort of research is seldom thematized as *internal crisis management* and *crisis communication*. Key examples of such factors are: *Decision-making in crisis situations* (Boin, 't Hart, Stern, & Sundelius, 2005; Janis, 1982), *crisis perception* (Penrose, 2000), *defense mechanisms* (Pauchant & Mitroff, 1992), *organizational learning* (Roux-Dufort, 2000),

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