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# Meaning making by public leaders in times of crisis: An assessment

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## ABSTRACT

Public leaders are expected to provide information on a crisis situation and present a plan to restore a state of normalcy. This study, based on interviews with Dutch mayors who were personally involved in crises between 1979 and 2014, assesses the various roles of public leaders' meaning making. A total of 94 case studies were analyzed for this purpose. Responsibility and collective impact turn out to be closely intertwined phenomena, which influence the *modus operandi* as a public leader as perceived by the mayors themselves. The Public Meaning Making Model presented, shows four distinctive roles based on the *meaning making* by Dutch mayors: the roles of 'mourner-in-chief', 'orchestrator', 'advocate' and 'buddy'. All of these roles emphasize different elements that depend on the collective, emotional impact of a situation as well as on the political responsibility attributed to the public leader. This article discusses the characteristics and implications of each of the four roles.

## 1. Introduction

In the wake of a mass traumatic event, *meaning making* is a key aspect of crisis management when people expect their public leaders to appear on the public stage. For public leaders, the challenge of *meaning making* lies in effective communication while taking into account the politically charged issues of causation, responsibility and accountability (Ansell, Boin, & 't Hart, 2014). Despite the apparent relevance of *meaning making* for public leaders, empirical studies on the context of *meaning making* are limited.

Because crises differ in context, the public's expectations of their leaders might vary from one crisis to another. Vice versa, in order to better understand the concept of *meaning making*, the question arises whether public leaders change their *meaning making* behavior when the context of a crisis changes. A context in which stakeholders are both senders and receivers, in which they transact and co-create meaning through the ongoing and simultaneous exchange of a variety of messages while using multiple channels (Sellnow & Seeger, 2013). This empirical and exploratory study builds on recent research to better understand the concept of *meaning making* in relation to issues of responsibility and accountability, and addresses calls to examine the processes and outcomes of crisis management (Ansell et al., 2014; Boin & Gralépois, 2006; Jong, Dückers, & Van der Velden, 2016a). The framework used, analyzes 94 crisis cases dealt with by Dutch mayors that differ greatly in terms of political responsibility and collective impact. Subsequently similar case studies are analyzed and presented. Finally, an overview of overall findings can be found at the end of the article.

## 2. Drivers for meaning making

### 2.1. Public leader as communicator

In this study, the central theme consists of the *modus operandi* of the public leader on the public stage. When compared to the

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rhetoric of business counterparts, the rhetoric of public leaders has a distinct angle. Corporate crisis communications literature seems to emphasize the rhetoric from a point of view focused on reputation and repair of image and credibility for the crises they caused (Arendt, LaFleche, & Limperopulos, 2017). Public leaders, on the other hand, are often confronted with the public impact of crises and will also be held responsible for crises caused by others. This public role comes with a broader set of rhetorical functions, which include expressing sympathy to victims, symbolically framing the meaning of the event, regaining public confidence, and facilitating renewal through public commitments (Griffin-Padgett & Allison, 2010; Jong et al., 2016a, 2016b; Littlefield & Quenette, 2007; Seeger, Sellnow, & Ulmer, 2003). The rhetorical arena may remain open in the after crisis stage, generating a “crisis after the crisis” (Frandsen & Johansen, 2010; Rosenthal, Boin, & Comfort 2001). The rituals to re-connect to citizens and to lower the possible impact of blame-games in such an aftermath of crises, is part of the communicative repertoire (Resodihardjo, Carroll, Van Eijk, & Maris, 2016).

People that experience a crisis, try to make sense of what happened and place it in a broader perspective (Stern, 2013). Public leaders support them in this process, interpret the situation, use rhetoric to make sense of the situation, make sure they are concerned about the emotional and physical well-being of citizens, and actively communicate what is happening and what needs to be done (Boin & ‘t Hart, 2003; Boin, ‘t Hart, Stern, Sundelius, 2005; Griffin-Padgett & Allison, 2010; Helsloot & Groenendaal, 2017; Jong, Dückers & Van der Velden, 2016b). Public leaders try to give an understanding of ‘what is going on’, to reduce uncertainty, to provide recognition, to offer hope (Jong et al., 2016b; Noordegraaf & Newman, 2011; Pennebaker and Lay, 2002), and to actively call upon resilience and pride (De Bussy & Paterson, 2012). At the same time, public leaders will try to restore trust in government and its public leadership in order to smoothen the political aftermath of crises and underscore the government is fully in charge (Boin, 2009; Pinkert et al., 2007). This meaning making is not only visible through words but also through actions. Public leaders join remembrances and sometimes visit families and the next of kin at home, to lend them a ‘listening ear’ and support them with practical issues (Jong et al., 2016b). Sometimes, crises evolve into “social icons” (Frandsen & Johansen, 2016). Those crises create long-lasting shadows in terms of remembrance and recurring media attention in the years and decades after the crisis occurred.

Leaders are supposed to be successful as soon as they attract support for processes and decisions, enhancing reputation and/or electoral prospects for leaders’ parties and governments (McConnell, 2011). Davis and Gardner (2012) revealed that President Bush’s use of charismatic rhetoric escalated following the September 11 terrorist attacks, and that during this time period he was also perceived as an effective leader. One is, therefore, not only evaluated on the basis of direct political responsibility and actions, but also on presentation and communication (De Bussy & Paterson, 2012). Presentational strategies are important but, when inappropriately used, can backfire (Resodihardjo et al., 2016).

*Meaning making* is intertwined with issues of responsibility and accountability (Boin & ‘t Hart, 2003; Gasper & Reeves, 2011; Lay, 2009; Resodihardjo, van Eijk, & Carroll, 2012), since people also wonder “*how could this crisis have happened?*”. In general, the search for answers to the question “*how could this have happened?*” often degenerates into “*blame games*” in relation to responsibilities, where media appoint winners and declare losers (Boin, Kuipers, & Overdijk, 2013). According to crisis management and crisis communication theories, a higher level of responsibility for the cause of the crisis increases the blame level a public leader can expect. In a comparative study of the rhetoric of mayors Giuliani and Nagin in the aftermath of 9/11 and hurricane Katrina, Griffin-Padgett and Allison (2010) note that when responsibility is high, image restoration rather than regaining public confidence becomes the main goal. As such, *meaning making* is a way to respond in the public arena to protect one’s reputation and is crucial to the legitimacy of public leadership (Jong et al., 2016a).

## 2.2. The psychosocial impact

While reputations are certainly important for the process of political accountability, the purpose of public *meaning making* seems broader than the reputation of a governmental institution or public leaders alone. A public leader may be heading public rituals and commemorations, and has to take care of the practical and psychosocial interests of the bereaved individuals concerned (Jong, 2013; Jong et al., 2016b). A study on 54 mayors who were confronted with the aftermath of the MH17-disaster showed that these public leaders were expected to speak at memorials and attend community activities, even though they carried no direct political responsibility for this particular disaster.

Several studies demonstrated the importance of “social acknowledgement” and mental health following drastic events (Maercker & Müller, 2004; Park, 2016): *meaning making* is of importance for the resilience and recovery after stressful events (Park, 2016). Although these studies do not extensively focus on the role of public leaders, they do refer to concepts like “social acknowledgement”. In other words, how does the victim experience the positive reactions from a society that shows understanding of his or her unique position, and acknowledges the victim’s current difficult situation (Maercker & Müller, 2004). In a study among adults who experienced the events of 9/11, findings suggest that meaning supported adjustment by reducing the fears of future terrorist attacks (Updegraff, Silver, & Holman, 2008). But whether or not Giuliani’s public leadership did positively or negatively influence this process of meaning making, remains unknown.

## 3. Framework to assess *meaning making*

In order to meet our goal and compare *meaning making* efforts under different crises circumstances, we take the stance from public leaders themselves, since they take the final decision to deliver on *meaning making*. We set up a qualitative analysis of interviews with those involved in crises and looked for similarities in their self-perceived *meaning making* efforts in crises that are comparable in terms of collective impact and political responsibility. This approach is scarce but useful in addition to existing mediated case studies and

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