



Collaboration in disasters: A cultural challenge for the utilities sector

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ABSTRACT

Understanding the interdependency of organizations in a disaster is necessary to facilitate collaboration. Interdependencies in the utilities sector have traditionally focused upon the technical aspects of these dependencies. This research used empirical research methods that included an observational study of utility stakeholders during a real-time disaster. The study investigated the cultural challenges associated with the socio-cultural interdependencies that stakeholders from the utilities sector encountered when working in emergency management. Participants identified that a lack of legitimacy and trust created barriers to collaboration. The paper concludes with recommendations for the industry to address the potential cultural barriers encountered in a disaster.

1. Introduction

Modern society is reliant on the effective functioning of utilities to provide public services, maintain a quality of life and encourage economic growth (Boin and McConnell, 2007). However, certain utilities and network industries such as energy, water, transport, and communications are so vital and ubiquitous that their capacity or destruction can affect the security and social welfare of any nation (Gheorghe et al., 2007). There is an expectation in industrialised societies that essential utility services will still be available during extreme disaster conditions (Marti and Hollman, 2008). Despite this belief, disasters such as Hurricane Katrina in 2005, and more recently, the 2015 earthquake in Nepal, caused untold damage to the utilities sector depriving its citizens of basic services for extended periods and resulted in astronomical rebuilding costs (Leavitt, 2006; Simpson and Lasley, 2010; Sharma, 2015). There is a substantial amount of literature investigating interdependencies in the utilities sector in reference to disasters (Rinaldi et al., 2001; Brown et al., 2004; Leavitt, 2006; Sarriegi et al., 2008; Chiaradonna et al., 2011). However, the primary feature of analysis regarding these interdependencies is predominantly from a technical perspective. A limited literature describes the socio-cultural interdependencies pertaining to the utilities sector. These socio-cultural interdependencies are important and especially in a disaster due to the requirement for all parties involved to collaborate.

Disasters of any magnitude require governments to mount a response that will invariably require the enactment of emergency management arrangements. Emergency management is the managerial function charged with creating the framework within which communities reduce vulnerability to hazards and cope with disasters (FEMA,

2007). Emergency management customarily necessitates a collaborative approach that always involves the emergency services and invariably, organizations from other sectors, including those from the utilities sector (Schraagen and Van de Ven, 2008; Van Scotter et al., 2012). For the purpose of this paper, the emergency services are the police, fire, and ambulance agencies (sometimes called first responders). Stakeholders from the utilities sector together with those representing the emergency services and other non-emergency agencies have to transition from being autonomous entities (in non-disaster situations) into interdependent decision-making teams (Janssen et al., 2010). The formation of these temporary supra-organizations is complex and fraught with difficulties including communication challenges (Comfort and Kapucu, 2006; Manoj and Baker, 2007; Aedo et al., 2010), information challenges and decision making challenges (Baber et al., 2007; Ley et al., 2012). An additional complexity can be the coordination between the multiple agencies involved that can become dysfunctional in the absence of effective mechanisms when having to operate under high stress, high risk, dynamic conditions (Janssen et al., 2010; Salmon et al., 2011). Coordination requires both communication, some sense of cooperation and the sharing of information and resources (Huxham and Vangen, 2005; Martin et al., 2016). However, coordination has a limited effect on the overall efficiency of the response or recovery efforts if it is not combined with collaborative efforts (Raju and Becker, 2013). Consequently, collaboration is more complex than simply communication, cooperation or coordination (Huxham and Vangen, 2005). Collaboration is when people from different organizations create and sustain relationships that encourage trust, build consensus, produce and share ownership of a collective objective (Kamensky and Burlin, 2004; FEMA, 2007). When dealing with

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uncertainty in emergency management, a willingness to collaborate is an inevitable, let alone indispensable, tool to deal with complex extreme events (Waugh and Streib, 2006; Arklay, 2015). A plethora of in depth case studies have highlighted failures of inter-organizational collaboration across different sectors in high profile international catastrophic disasters, see for examples Hurricane Katrina in 2005 (Farazmand, 2007), the 2010 Haiti earthquake (Nolte and Boenigk, 2011) and more recently, Hurricane Maria that made landfall in Puerto Rico in 2017 (Zorrilla, 2017).

Accentuating the complexities associated with inter-organizational collaboration are the varying and often contrasting organizational cultures which come together in complex, dynamic conditions (Beyer et al., 2000; Waugh and Streib, 2006). To facilitate collaboration in emergency management, stakeholders from the utilities sector may be requested to provide representation at a designated emergency operations centre. These stakeholders are liaison officers. This role can be particularly challenging for stakeholders from the utilities sector that may not regularly work in an emergency management environment and are often culturally different from their emergency services counterparts. In the absence of prior inter-agency development, this can also result in increased conflict and confusion (Paton and Owen, 2013). Organizations with shared cultural memberships based on shared norms such as the emergency services, hold a common understanding and set of expectations about what is required to establish and maintain a trusting collaborative relationship (Dietz et al., 2010). However, this familiarity may not be readily available when engaging stakeholders from the utilities sector that often have different organizational cultures which can challenge trust from the outset and be a barrier to collaboration (McKnight et al., 1988; Banai and Reisel, 1999). Therefore the cultural challenges that stakeholders from the utilities sector encounter when collaborating in emergency management warrants further investigation.

The aim of this study was to understand the cultural challenges faced by stakeholders from the utilities sector when working in emergency management. This article is structured as follows, the ensuing section provides a brief overview of the importance of culture in the context of emergency management. The following section then presents the research methodology followed by the main results identified from the empirical data. The next section discusses the findings and offers some practical guidance for industry. The concluding section provides the limitations of the study and offers recommendations for future research.

2. Cultural complexities

Definitions of culture are diverse (Dietz et al., 2010). Organizational culture concerns itself with both shared ideas and practices that members of organizations affirm and communicate with one another (Trice and Beyer, 1993). These practices help to guide members of organizations to survive, adapt and achieve collectively in their uncertain and sometimes chaotic worlds (Beyer et al., 2000). Nevertheless, the problem is that the concept of culture is not comprehensively articulated in the emergency management literature. In this environment, underscoring the complexities of developing an effective emergency response are the varying organizational cultures and in particular, hierarchical governmental organizations such as police agencies (Waugh and Streib, 2006). Marcus et al. (2006) describe how the deeply ingrained bureaucratic cultures of some organizations compel an allegiance to their own agency-based independence that can foster a culture of rivalry among organizations. This was highlighted during the 2001 terrorist attacks in New York City in an extreme example between the fire and police agencies. These two interdependent agencies had a history of antagonism, upon responding to the disaster, they established separate command centres and operated incompatible radio systems resulting in a lack of information sharing. A police agency helicopter observing the disastrous events at the World Trade Centre

foresaw the collapse of the towers and radioed the police to evacuate, tragically this message never reached fire-fighters in the vicinity (Marcus et al., 2006). This cultural interoperability is associated with hindering the sharing of information between agencies during a disaster (Iannella and Henricksen, 2007; Marincioni, 2007).

Organizational cultures expressing the beliefs of the stakeholders within the organization can convey a sense of identity which can generate membership of in-groups and out-groups (Smircich, 1983). Traditionally within the context of emergency management, the emergency services are associated with the in-group and other non-emergency organizations, including those from the utilities sector, can be deemed to be in the out-group. This can be particularly detrimental in emergency operations centres. An example is that in this work domain, organizations associated with the in-group can often receive more information than those stakeholders located in the out-group (Militello et al., 2007). The role of gender can also be associated with out-groups and especially in masculine environments. Owen (2013) explored whether gender was an underlying factor with the challenges faced during emergency management when teams are required to pool their ideas and concerns to resolve challenges. This research suggested that there are particular cultural practices associated with masculinity that work to shut down communication and contribute specifically to the marginalisation of female voices in the emergency management environment (Owen, 2013). Having the ability to voice concerns and be 'heard' in a multi-organizational environment is critical, as trust would be severely degraded if someone with key knowledge or specific concerns were ignored.

Trust is often vital in securing sustainable relationships among disparate organizations and is especially evident in ambiguous situations characterised by uncertainty as experienced in emergency management. However, developing and maintaining trust between different cultural organizations is a formidable challenge. Stakeholders from different organizations can bring conflicting cultural beliefs, behaviours, and assumptions to a temporary organization which can prevent successful interaction and collaboration (Dietz et al., 2010). The emergency services often have similar command structures and work together in routine operations as well as collaborating in emergency operations centres during a disaster. Consequently, the familiarity that is gained over time between emergency services can foster a sense of trust among these different stakeholders (Dirks and Ferrin, 2001). In contrast, given the fact that some disasters (e.g., earthquakes) can occur without warning, in the absence of prior work on developing collaborative capability, liaison officers from the utilities sector may not have the luxury of building relationships over time and could face challenges associated with gaining trust in temporary organizations. As organizational interoperability intensifies, the collaboration of organizations from the public and private sectors required in the response operations increases as the range of problems they confront widens (Comfort and Kapucu, 2006).

3. Research methodology

The aim of this study was to enhance the understanding of the cultural challenges faced by utilities personnel when working in Australian emergency management arrangements. This paper used an existing data set that was initially collected in 2013 to explore the role of liaison officers working within temporary multi-agency organizations during disasters. In emergency management, liaison officers represent their organization and are often requested by the emergency services to attend an emergency operations centre to provide and seek information. The aforementioned research project involved numerous organizations from multiple sectors that would be involved in Australian emergency management arrangements. This included those representing the emergency services (e.g. police, fire and ambulance agencies), the not-for-profit sector (e.g. Red Cross), land management agencies (e.g. public sector parks and wildlife organizations), federal

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