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Crisis Management Between Public Relations and the Holonic Multi-Agent Approach

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Abstract

Crisis management represents a multidisciplinary topic in many sciences. Social sciences, state affairs, medicine, engineering and many others are interested to handle unforeseen major great impact events. The paper presents some differences and common topics of crisis management using two different approaches. The first is Public Relations (PR), as part of the communication sciences; and the second is the Holonic Multi-Agent (HMAS) Concept, which is a research topic belonging to software engineering and computational sciences. We have two different approaches, but one common goal: providing the feasible support for the crisis management team under abnormal working conditions. Dealing with the holonic approach, the paper suggests a centralized distributed crises management, a non-linear approach in which the human factor's intuition, skills and expertise are key elements.
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1. Introduction

Crisis situations can happen everywhere, anytime, to everybody. Crises are part of each-day life, but we are set to believe that these unexpected events will not happen to us. This is valid for us as individuals, but also for the organizations, as well. If unpredictable situations occur, humans by instinct try to solve the situation and/or get out of it. In the case of organisations where hundreds and thousands of people might be involved the situation gets more

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complicated. This might lead to uncontrollable collective behaviour. The unexpected collective behaviour of complex systems is called emergent. In the case of those systems in which beside the human operators there are highly automated technologies with computers, robots, intelligent machines and other devices to handle a crisis situation it is even more complicated. System and software engineers, human resource specialists, managers, PR practitioners and many other experts work together to be prepared for the unexpected.

We'll mean here by crisis a sudden emergency event that causes serious damages and might have major consequences to the future of the company. This restricted definition of the crisis overlooks those situations when the unexpected event has impact only at the level individuals or a small group of people, and also ignores those situations that must be handled by governmental authorities. In our case in the stake is the survival of the organization, regardless of its size and the causes of the crisis in which it might be involved. The author of this paper tries to make a contribution to the rich literature of crisis management by merging the concepts developed by Public Relations scholars and practitioners, experts of social (human) communication sciences, with the latest achievements of the multi-agent concepts designed by software engineers, experts in computer sciences. By presenting and comparing the two different approaches we can make visible the advantages and disadvantages of these two approaches. By more, we suggest a non-linear system approach, based on the holonic system concept, which provides unusual approach for both sciences, thus new theoretical perspectives arise. By merging some characteristics of these approaches, and adding a non-linear approach, we create an innovative environment in which managers can find better solutions for handling crisis situations. That is the reason why this paper is prepared for an international conference in Management and Entrepreneurship.

The paper is organized as follows. In the following first two paragraphs there are presented some key issues of the two scientific fields. These reviews are not (only) critical statements of the presented approaches, but also contain proposals and contributions of the paper for the presented topic. The last paragraph assembles the most important findings of the previous discussions and makes some recommendations.

2. Preparing for the unexpected from PR point of view

Handling a crisis situation, in a first instance, it's about communication. The success rate of getting out with minimal damages often hinges on what, to whom and how we communicate. Crisis communication, being an extremely important topic of communication sciences, it has its own literature. We acknowledge, PR practitioners must be in crisis management teams in any organisation, and a specially trained staff should do the crisis communication. The majority of communication scholars treat crisis communication as distinct PR activity in organization. Beside some reference scholars like Fearn-Bank (Fearn-Banks, 2002), or David Guth David and Charles Marsh, (Guth- Marsh, 2005), some authors try to present the overall picture of crisis management integrating crisis communication in different strategies and tactics of the organization (Coombs, 2006), (Bernstein, 2011), (Barton, 2001)

At this level of development of crisis communication theory, the organizations are mostly considered as linear systems, in which changes of the inputs result proportional changes of the outputs (for example, they may incorrectly assume, the consequences of an accident are proportional to the number of victims or the value of damages). This way of preparing for the crisis situations omits, same to the most engineering and management models, the fact that crisis situations appears for that very reason that the previous linearization of the system missed a singularity or an extremely unexpected value. The safety measures, the communication protocols and many other frames used by management to rule an organization supposes that all variables fluctuates between a predictable ranges. The systems might collapse if these values go beyond the expected margins. That is why we suggest that communication experts should not assume that they can be prepared for the unexpected situations in all stages of crisis management.

Timothy Coombs, one of the reference names in crisis communication, same to the majority of the scholars, identifies three phases of crisis management: pre-crisis, crisis and post-crisis (Coombs, 2010). In the first phase there are preparations before crisis. The organization using risk and crisis management techniques tries to prevent any crisis to occur, or prepare itself if the situation still happens. The second phase is the response to ongoing crises; this is the "real" crisis management. The last phase, the post-crisis, takes place after the crisis is finished. At this stage the management evaluates how the situation was handled, it is analyzed what were the reasons of the crisis and what can be learned about this event. The scientific literature and the practice already set up specific techniques for all the three stages. In Table 1. we present some of the recommended issues during risk management.

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