

Issue management and crisis management: An integrated, non-linear, relational construct

Tony Jaques*

RMIT University, Melbourne, Australia

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Abstract

Despite extensive attempts to define and differentiate issue management and crisis management, the definitional approach – and linear life-cycle models which focus on the elements – fail to capture the full dynamics of the disciplines. Instead of a focus on definitions, this paper proposes a non-linear, relational construct which considers issue and crisis management in the context of interdependent activities and clusters of activity which must be managed at different stages. This includes the role of issue management in both the pre-crisis and post-crisis phases. The model addresses some of the limitations of linear approaches and helps analyze the outcomes and overlaps between activity clusters in order to optimize strategic relationships and enhance bottom-line effectiveness.

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1. Introduction

During the parallel development of issue management and crisis management there have been extensive academic and practitioner attempts to define and differentiate the two disciplines.

Issue management as a defined activity began in the late 1970s but the first book devoted solely to issue management was not published until 1984 (Howard Chase: *Issue Management – Origins of the Future*). Significantly, one of the seminal works on the emerging discipline of crisis management was published just two years later (Steve Fink: *Crisis Management: Planning for the Inevitable*).

Chase and his colleague Barry Jones established the pioneering definition that an issue is “an unsettled matter which is ready for decision” (Chase, 1984, p. 38). Over the ensuing twenty years, issues have been defined and categorized in many different ways. Yet, there has come to be reasonably broad acceptance of an issue as “a condition or event, either internal or external to the organization which, if it continues, will have a significant effect of the functioning or performance of the organization or on its future interests” (cited in Regester & Larkin, 2002, p. 42).

At the same time there appears to now be a good level of agreement in the management literature about the definition of a crisis. This broad consensus has been consolidated by Christine Pearson and Judith Clair (1998, p. 60). “An organizational crisis is a low probability, high impact event that threatens the viability of the organization and is

* Correspondence address: RMIT University, School of Applied Communication, GPO Box 2476V, Melbourne 3001, Australia.

Tel.: +61 3 9226 3603; fax: +61 3 9226 3694.

E-mail address: ajagues@dow.com.

characterized by ambiguity of cause, effects and means of resolution, as well as by a belief that decisions must be made swiftly.”

More recently Anne Gregory (2005, p. 313) similarly reported that a literature review concludes crises are characterized as “high consequence, low probability, overlaid with risk and uncertainty, conducted under time-pressure, disruptive of normal business and potentially lethal to organizational reputation.”

However, the challenge is not so much in defining issue and crisis but in the *application* of those definitions to management theory and practice.

2. The definitional approach

While there is now a good degree of consensus about what is a crisis and what is an issue, there is much less consensus on how to define crisis management and virtually none at all on how to define issue management. Robert Heath wrote in 1997 (p. 5) that no definition of issue management had achieved consensus and his judgment remains valid. This lack of clarity suggests that while crises can properly be defined independent of crisis management, it is difficult to define issues independent of issue management.

The weakness of the purely definitional approach is illustrated by a student thesis (Monstad, 2003, p. 1) which typifies a common misapprehension: “Issue management involves mainly looking into the future to identify potential trends and events which *may* influence the organization, while crisis management is a more reactive discipline focusing on the situation *after* a crisis has occurred.” While a crisis is by definition a situation out of control (Benedict, 1994, p. 22), this concept of crisis management as purely reactive would be valid only if crisis management is regarded simply as a tactical discipline.

Unlike issue management, where both strategic and tactical elements are recognized, the same distinction for crisis management is less well understood, which perpetuates superficial distinctions and impedes progress. Within a strategic context, crisis management should be seen not just as a tactical reactive response when a crisis hits, but as a proactive discipline embracing inter-related processes ranging from crisis prevention and crisis preparedness through crisis response and on to crisis recovery.

When crisis management is viewed in this holistic way the focus turns to process rather than definitions, and research makes it clear that definitions alone are an insufficient basis for properly understanding the integral relationship between issue management and crisis management.

3. Life cycle models

Beyond purely definitional attempts to distinguish between issue management and crisis management, life cycle models have been developed and analyzed to illustrate the distinction and relationship between different management elements (including Mahon & Waddock, 1992; Bigelow, Fahey, & Mahon, 1993; González-Herrero & Pratt, 1996; Jaques, 2000; and Zyglidopoulos, 2003).

Life cycle models broadly rely on two common propositions – that some problems left unaddressed trend towards increasing seriousness and greater risk; and that the longer an issue survives, the choices available decrease and cost of intervention and resolution increases. The labels and vocabulary may vary, but in general such models graphically illustrate that matters of contention typically move progressively along a sequence from concern to problem to issue to crisis and then to some form of resolution.

A key weakness of life cycle models is that they are linear, suggesting that activities take place in a sequential fashion, leading to some form of resolution. The models also imply that competing issues are managed one at a time, whereas different issues are often managed simultaneously, frequently each at different phases. In reality issue management is inherently not a linear process. As Bigelow et al. (1993, p. 29) concluded: “Issues do not necessarily follow a linear, sequential path, but instead follow paths that reflect the intensity and diversity of the values and interests stakeholders bring to an issue and the complexity of the interaction among the . . . factors.”

Stephen Hilgartner and Charles Bosk (1988, p. 54) explored issue life cycle theory in the context of a natural history model (which posits that social problem recognition and attention follows an orderly trajectory akin to evolution). But Lamertz, Martens, and Heugens (2003, p. 83) are critical of what they call “highly stylized” natural history models. “The main source of discontent,” they argue, “is that issues often fail to progress along predictable lines, and deviate frequently from the linear, sequential path suggested by evolutionary frameworks.”

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