Crisis management and public policy

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Crisis management encompasses more than natural disasters. New threats such as energy security, hacking and infrastructure breakdown are emerging. It is time to rethink the role of crisis management in the national policy agenda and bring it in from the shadows and into the light.

Crisis management is a unique field that has grown out of lived experiences with natural hazard events like fires, floods and cyclones. When I moved from public policy research into the crisis management field, it prompted me to consider how the two are intertwined. It raised an important question of whether crisis management should be included in mainstream policy agendas. Not only because of the rise of disasters but because of the lessons it provides on effective collaboration.

Public policy is a broad discipline grounded on the dichotomy between policy development and service delivery, with an increasing emphasis on collaboration. Many debates that occur in public policy are similar to those in crisis management. These include whether top-down or network approaches are better, knowing your readiness to collaborate, the effects of leadership and the balance between systems, institutions and relationships.

Crisis management: the outlier

Crises pose significant challenges to communities, governments, non-government organisations and the private sector. We know there is a trend for these events to increase with the emergence of new threats. Despite this, crisis management remains an outlier in terms of the national public policy debate.

A paradigm shift is required so that learning from crises can be applied to mainstream policy discussions. The core issues that drive crisis preparation and response are replicated in other complex policy domains:

• How do we effectively join up agencies?

This remains fundamental across emergency services and the public sector and can be best summed up as #weworkasone, acknowledging that the way agencies interact is as important as the actions taken during an unfolding disaster. Equally, having a disposition towards collaboration, being resourced to work collaboratively and being rewarded for good practices weigh the odds in favour of successful outcomes.

• Identifying an organisation's readiness to collaborate and the barriers to overcome.

There is a strategic benefit in looking at organisational readiness for collaboration. This can identify barriers to overcome. A heat map of the organisation's existing state can be developed to inform future strategy. We should consider the disjuncture between willingness and implementation capacity.

• Effectively balancing structure and agency.

A recurring theme is whether it is structures or individuals that drive positive outcomes. Where appropriate structures don't exist, cut-through can occur based on the strength of established relationships. Conversely, relationships can be fragile and may change. Institutionalising and capitalising on positive relationships supports ongoing collaboration.

• What does success look like?

The measure of success is subjective based on the perspective of the individuals involved. In a major event, the loss of 5–10 properties may seem like a success if hundreds were saved. But to the community, it will feel like a failure given their loss. The success or failure of a policy is contingent on stakeholder worldviews.

• What happens when things go wrong?

There are common lessons that arise when things go wrong. A cover-up of the issue is never acceptable. Equally, internal blame and an unwillingness to own up to the problem is troublesome. In the aftermath of a crisis, taking responsibility, letting the public know you are being responsible, showing that the crisis is being taken seriously and having plans to remediate problems is best.

We are in an era where climate change will bring prolonged and extreme events. We are experiencing new threats to information technology and essential services that will affect entire populations. It is important to understand that the management of crises yields many lessons that can be used to manage other difficult and intractable policy problems. We should leverage the opportunity that exists now rather than later.

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