

Continuity

The Magazine of the Business Continuity Institute

CONVERSATIONS IN A CRISIS

Transforming conversation into strategies

THE VALUE OF COLLABORATION

Building resilience through collaboration

FAULTY TOWERS

The human aspects of a crisis

THE ORGANIZATIONAL RESILIENCE COMMUNITY



COVER STORY

James McAlister sees the fantastic development of our organizational resilience community, with the age and diversity of our practitioners widening and the sectors they work in becoming more varied **PAGE 04**

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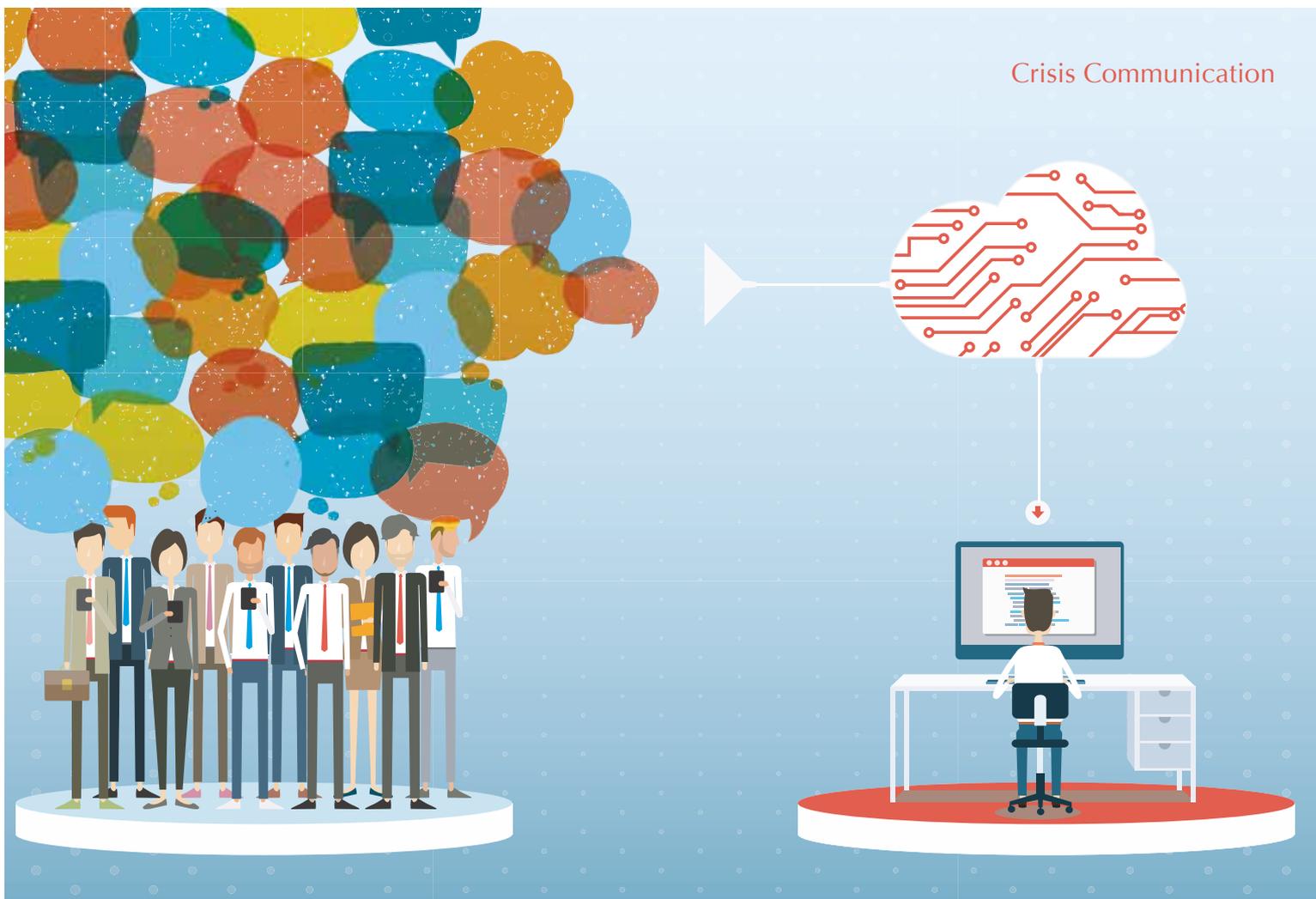
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CONVERSATIONS IN A CRISIS

Stijn Pieters and Tim Van Achte transform informal conversation and sentiments into invaluable data and solid strategies

In a decade of experience in the hot seat, we are pleased to have advised in many fields on business continuity. Solving different kinds of crises with our clients, we witnessed many complex situations which put stressed organisations to the test. During each of these interventions, our team becomes more aware that the aftermath of an incident can generate a much wider impact than the crisis itself. A chain of unpredictable and unanticipated consequences unfolds. Almost by rule, handling these consequences is even more daunting than dealing with the actual event. The impact of a crisis manifests in many forms, both inside and outside of an organisation. From a wider perspective, 'in' and 'out' are actually different realities co-existing in the same crisis. Therefore, in our experience, the main complexity of such "crisis after the crisis" phenomena is that they are informal in nature.

This aftermath of a crisis is also characterized by heightened levels of stress, very strong emotional responses, biased opinions, unconfirmed information, rumours, and increased conversation among groups of people affected. We have witnessed many executive and management teams struggle with such large scale, fast evolving impacts. Do we regard these informal phenomena as merely side effects? Should we simply avoid these variables as they are clearly interfering with our pre-defined crisis routines and procedures? Or are these phenomena actually vital from a business continuity perspective? In our roadmap to resilience

and crisis preparedness, we strongly believe the latter. Therefore, every organisation should be prepared to monitor and nurture conversations for the invaluable *crisis intelligence* that they generate. We believe this to be crucial for a swift, accurate response that is immediately followed by highly effective crisis management strategies.

Principles and work processes first

While preparing companies and governments for business continuity challenges and advising them during acute crises, we learned first hand the importance of leading crisis teams to focus on clear principles, processes, techniques and tools. After many years, we came to a conclusion: it is not the crisis plan documentation, but the actual network of internal and external experts and their common work processes that will greatly improve an organisation's crisis preparedness. When preparing organisations for their next crisis, our aim has been to put emphasis on what works and what doesn't work. Developing these common work processes for and with many teams, we have incorporated various insights and key learnings for different types of crisis: *fast and slow burning* challenges, but also *long shadow* and *cathartic* crisis types.

As a milestone, we co-developed the Crisis Communication Work Process with several European experts. This model was implemented in numerous organisations including Belgium's federal level. Countless examples from various sectors have

demonstrated the effectiveness of this universal work process even in the most complex of situations. Examples range from:

- Belgium’s Federal Crisis Centre’s communication with citizens in the aftermath of the Brussels terrorist attacks in 2016 (awarded in 2017 by EENA112 for its remarkable crisis communication);
- A cultural re-adjustment of a BEL 20 company after the alleged chemical poisoning of children;
- Communications about radiological and nuclear related incidents at one of the largest research institutions in Belgium;
- Numerous hospitals dealing with medical errors and mistakes with grave consequences;
- Major layoffs at different banks due to a digitizing world;
- Organisations held hostage by cyber criminals.

- Spatial analysis: render geolocated data on a map, figure or other simplified view;
- Object relationships: render a network of events or people as a visual network with nodes and links;
- Time/trend analysis: combine different relevant contextual data on a timeline.

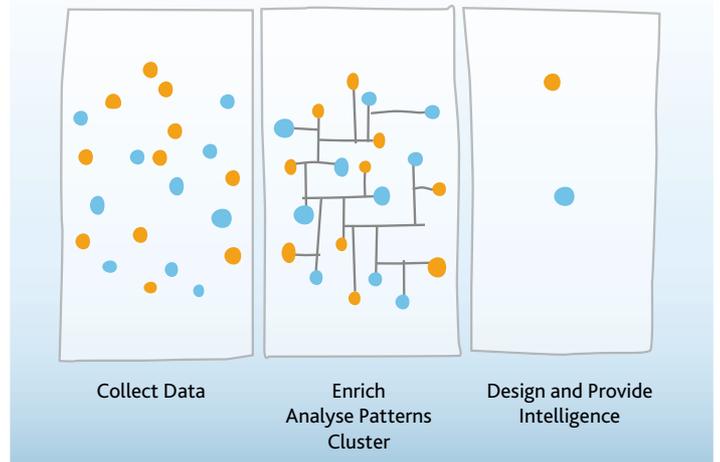


Figure 2: the Crisis Intelligence work process

In order to make sense of these heterogeneous inputs, however, we need to think about reshaping and restructuring them for the benefit of decision makers. Frameworks based on underlying theory and common sense allow us to analyse human elements, perceptions and sentiments. When done right, information analysis of informal conversations produces actionable insights for all three types of crisis teams: operational (disaster recovery), managerial (business continuity) and communication (internal and external). Collecting and processing vast amounts of conversational data enables crisis teams to improve their informed decision making. As a crucial crisis management skill, exploring ways to make better decisions should be on the agenda of almost every crisis related team, be it a fire squad, city government or corporate management team. However, the actual activity of gathering information and knowing which sources to consult is often overlooked. This is a missed opportunity for those high performing teams, as only the correct information assists crisis teams to turn an escalating, uncertain issue into a manageable state. Often, one decision in a crisis can change its destiny, diminish risk and prevent further harm. This is only possible thanks to the actionable crisis intelligence at your disposal.

Build your story upon the authentic sentiments

We at PM Risk•Crisis•Change have been applying the concept of extensively mining informal conversations, particularly in crisis communication. In this field, traditional public relations and corporate communication approaches lack real impact in the fast

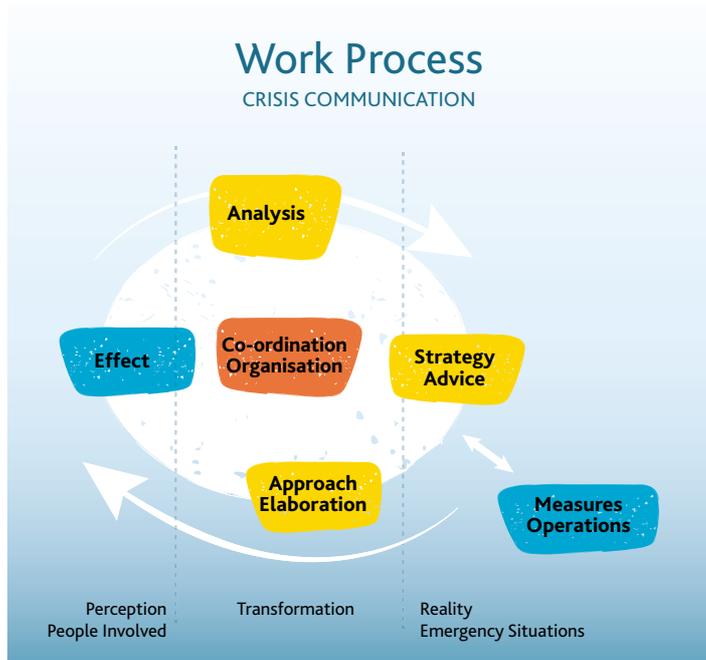


Figure 1: the Crisis Communication Work Process

Enrich raw data to actionable intelligence

Data driven approaches can help us deal with a lot of the questions that crisis managers and communications strategists are facing right now. The main challenge when attempting to derive strategies from informal conversations is that such data comes in many forms, in vast amounts, and is very hard to structure. A decade ago, management teams were lacking information during a crisis. In contrast, today we seem to have too much information. New ways of crisis management should focus on developments in society and technology. Proper information management is going to be needed in order to turn messy data into actionable intelligence. We call this ‘Enriching’. Various techniques are available to produce actionable and insightful information from raw data streams generated by involved parties and affected people. To enrich information we mostly rely on the following activities:

- Text/content analysis: render textual data in a form that presents its context and meaning;



Conversations are where the “crisis after the crisis” is going to materialise



KEY INFORMATION SOURCES

The following sources can provide data for your stakeholder and sentiment analysis:

- ◆ Social media conversations, images and video.
- ◆ Online news reports, radio and TV reports: these are very relevant in terms of revealing how the events are perceived.
- ◆ Spokespersons of the organisation: the amount of incoming calls and the questions asked are indicators of the sentiments.
- ◆ Front desk and call center employees: they form physical and virtual barriers with the outside world.
- ◆ Case specific communities that emerge because of the situation.
- ◆ Pre-existing internet communities: the news about your crisis might be shared and discussed here.
- ◆ Offline conversations: they happen in and out of your organisation, at the various levels, departments, etc.
- ◆ Friends and acquaintances: they are accessible sources to obtain information about how a situation is perceived on the surface level by the general public.

moving world of today. Organisations in a crisis can be overrun by well organised media outlets with massive reach, not to mention the tsunami of social media conversations and reactions by all involved parties (staff, unions, regulators, governments, experts, pundits, etc.). We have observed several related communication challenges:

- The vast landscape of internal and external stakeholders, filled with complex yet crucial interactions between organisations and communities;
- The need to swiftly yet effectively address the needs of various groups of people affected by a crisis;

- The need to focus on the right messages;
- The need to continuously bridge the gap between perception and reality;
- The need to immediately gain and maintain stakeholder trust.

The dominant approach in crisis communication strategies has always been to rely on intuition (harnessed experience) and gut feeling. We believe the time has come to be more mindful when attempting to communicate efficiently in a crisis. This starts with real data, rather than intuition. Therefore, we need to practice the art of turning informal conversations into strategic intelligence. The analysis of perception and sentiment is a big step forward if we want to address the daunting challenges mentioned earlier.

Claim the attention and establish yourself as a trusted source

Contrary to what we used to believe, communication has never been linear. In the age of digital media, it becomes clear that a sent message is not by definition received, let alone understood or acted upon. One of the big challenges of crisis communication is to make oneself heard in the noisy arena that arises when a crisis occurs. The main issue here is the *information vacuum*; the momentum of communication about a crisis that happens in the period immediately after the event. This is unfortunately the time when little or no information is available to the affected organisation(s). In order to establish your organisation as a trusted source, it is of utmost importance to claim the attention of the public from the very first moment. A quick sentiment analysis (it doesn't need to take more than fifteen minutes) helps crisis teams publish a genuine first reaction to the events. Thanks to this act, the stories that you tell the world will be based not on the opinions of your company's crisis team, but on the actual needs and questions of your stakeholders.

Conclusion

Informal conversations are happening online and offline as unavoidable parts of any crisis. They hold a lot of benefit for organisations. Each conversation you are able to monitor functions as an extra pair of eyes on your crisis. You should analyse, validate and report in a structured way on what is being said. Not only can such conversations easily be tapped into to restore credibility and trust, it is also highly probable that these conversations are where the "crisis after the crisis" is going to materialise.

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