

Management Team Solutions at Crisis Caused by The Covid-19 Pandemic

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Abstract: Crises are part of the life cycle of any organization, regardless of location, size, market and sector. At the beginning of 2020 all countries, their economies, the health system faced a new crisis caused by a pandemic of COVID-19. The rapid spread of the disease and its consequences on human health required an urgent response of organizations to take care of the health and protection of employees through physical distance. Organizations had to rethink their way of doing business and adapt to the new conditions. The first challenge in crisis management is to form a crisis management team. The main goal of the crisis management team is to implement within the organization a new way of functioning, using all its opportunities and strengths to mitigate the negative effects of the crisis. The success of crisis management and the adaptation to the new working conditions of an organization depends on the functioning of the crisis management team. The results of a survey conducted in September and October 2020, which included 115 members of crisis management teams, showed that those teams had responded correctly to the crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. The results of the research showed that the team members reacted correctly to the first signs of the crisis. They made quick and appropriate decisions using a holistic approach due to different knowledge, skills and experience, precise team roles, commitment to common strategy, open, fair and effective communication and mutual trust.

Keywords: leadership, solutions, teamwork, crisis management, communication, engagement, COVID-19.

1. Introduction

Crisis management is a set of factors designed to combat crises and reduce the damage caused by crises. In other words, it tries to prevent or reduce the negative effects of crises and to protect the organization, the people involved and the respective field from the possible damages caused by the consequences of the crisis.

Planning is the common denominator of all crisis management campaigns. How crises are managed and their impact depends on the quality of planning. Crisis response planning involves foresight, intuition, and retrospective understanding. The crisis often reveals the true face of an organization, as it exposes the organization to new circumstances and offers a completely new perspective on how the organization works, which is difficult to observe under normal conditions (Castillo, 2004). The Coronavirus Crisis is a test for the management of many companies, on how they will make decisions during the crisis will depend on the future results of the company or even its survival. Most of today's leaders have never faced such a challenge. The COVID-19 pandemic is making its way through the business world, and companies are losing billions of dollars. But the coronavirus causes much more than financial damage, the life and health of people and implicitly of employees being affected. It is difficult for leaders to motivate their employees and maintain courageous strategic plans, this period is a test of corporate leadership. A study on crisis management reveals a perspective on how companies and their employees can overcome these moments of uncertainty through appropriate and innovative measures.

This paper aims to highlight the role and importance of management teams in crisis management in organizations, with reference to the global crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. On December 31, 2019, the World Health Organization received information about the outbreak of a pneumonia epidemic of unknown origin in the Chinese city of Wuhan. On January 7, 2020, Chinese authorities identified a new SARS-CoV-2 virus, known as coronavirus or COVID-19. As the epidemic began to take on significant consequences, the Director-General of the World Health Organization declared an epidemic on 30 January 2020, and a global pandemic was declared on 11 March 2020.

The global risks that COVID-19 presents to human health are specific, as it spreads rapidly and easily (Xie, 2020), with a large social, psychological and economic impact. As a result, COVID-19 has caused crises in organizations, industry, the market and society, putting them in a position to find new ways of functioning, while respecting the measures of physical distance as a means of preventing the transmission and further spread of the virus. . Economic globalization and the dynamism of the environment have led to a faster and more intense transmission of the effects of the crisis. The flattening of the infection curve has inevitably unbalanced all supply chains and increased business uncertainty (Ivanov, 2020).

Literature review

*Important features of a crisis situation

As is well known, there are many definitions of the crisis, but none of them fully covers the phenomenon it is about to describe. This can be explained from at least two perspectives. On the

one hand, contemporary social dynamics, unprecedented in history, favor the emergence and manifestation of dysfunctions with major impact both for organizations and for the entire social environment in which they operate. These dysfunctions appear unexpectedly, are of an extremely great diversity (hence the difficulty of a unitary classification of crisis situations) and evolve uncontrollably. On the other hand, as it happens in the case of the phenomena that constitute object of study for complex disciplines or located in the area of interdisciplinarity, the multiple aspects of the crisis situations escape, in a greater or lesser proportion, the attempts of exhaustive definition. Therefore, we will have to accept in our approach partial definitions, with different degrees of generality. Thus, a crisis can be defined as an event that dramatically disrupts the normal functioning of an organization and negatively influences its public image or as a risky event, a serious, unforeseen change. Theorists and practitioners agree that any crisis is an uncertain, unknown, and undesirable event that requires a rapid response and has significant consequences for the organization and all stakeholders (Roux-Dufort, C., 2007), (Wang, 2008), (Nizamidou, 2019). Each crisis tests an organization's ability to adapt to new circumstances and direct its future (Heath, 2004). Regardless of its intensity and origin, a crisis poses a great danger to organizations because it can jeopardize their reputation, financial stability, and human lives (Coombs W. T., 2006), (Mitroff, 1998), (Mitroff, 2002). Also, a crisis leads to opportunities for organizations to open up for new business opportunities, as well as to strengthen their capabilities and capabilities (Bertrand, 2002), (Brockner, 2008), (Roux-Dufort, 2007). Organizations are not only facing more crises today than they did a decade ago, but the rate of crisis is also rising (Deloitte, 2019). In order to be able to classify crisis situations on the basis of relevant criteria, it is not enough to define them and discover the elements of opportunity, but it is necessary to identify them, to deepen them, to recognize them from the complexity of problems, processes and phenomena facing organizations. Well-known authors in the field state that, regardless of its type, a crisis can be recognized according to its specific features: - the appearance of new actors, who have their own version of the crisis and ask for explanations about it; - saturation of the communication capacities of the organization, due to the avalanche of requests that are triggered; - the importance of the stakes for the organization, with a major impact on its performances (in the case of a business organization, for example, the turnover is endangered, the trust given to the company and its products, the motivation of the employees); - increasing the temporal pressure and putting the organization in an emergency situation both from the perspective of the reaction and from the perspective of providing immediate information about causes, consequences; - the increase of uncertainties, by the fact that the organization is exposed to an inaccurate attitude regarding the origin of the crisis, responsibilities, stakes, impact, etc. But a careful analysis of them highlights their presence, their manifestation in various forms and their quality as an obvious signal of situations defined as dysfunctions.

***The role and importance of the crisis management team**

Crisis management contains three sequential objectives. The first, the ideal, is to prevent crises when possible. The second, if a crisis does occur, is to change the negative effects it could

have on the company or product. The third is to provide a platform for the future of the company. The outcome and response to the effects of a crisis always has to do with the readiness of the organization and how loyal the management is to the organization's missions and goals. A specific type of team in organizations that is a very important factor during crisis management is the crisis management team (Giplin, 2008), (Thompson, 2011). Every crisis needs a crisis management team, because an individual (leader / manager) cannot respond to all challenges, especially if he has never left the comfort zone and has no previous experience in crisis management (Pearson CM, 1997). . In general, teams today are different from teams of the past - they are more diverse, more digital, more dynamic and more distant (Haas, 2016). These differences and characteristics are even more expressed in crisis management teams, as they are responsible for designing strategies, policies and plans to respond quickly and adjust the way the organization works, so that the negative consequences of a crisis are minimized or completely avoided. (Reeves ML-S., 2020), (Vinch, 2013). The key role of crisis management teams is to anticipate the sources of risk, to provide adequate support to other employees and to position the organization towards the new normal course of operation (WorldAware, 2016). Members of a crisis management team should review, consider, analyze, plan and evaluate all the effects of the crisis on the organization's operations and prepare the organization for new ways and ways of working. The activities of the crisis management team continue when the crisis ends in order to assess the entire crisis event, to minimize the post-traumatic effects on employees and to mitigate the negative effects on the business (Alpaslan, 2009). Many organizations have set up permanent crisis management teams that are activated once a crisis event is detected (Waller, 2014). However, in cases where organizations do not have a permanent crisis management team, one should be formed at the first sign of crisis, so that team members understand their roles, responsibilities and obligations, determine how they work. before the crisis. Management should always have a list of employees who would be the most suitable members of the crisis management team, so that they can quickly form this team (Fink, 1986). In practice, there are organizations that select team members and form crisis management teams when the crisis has already begun to escalate.

The spread of COVID-19 has highlighted the importance of crisis management teams. A crisis management team dealing with COVID-19 focuses primarily on physical distancing, which means a change in work processes and business organization as far as possible in the remote mode, using modern technologies. The crisis management team should consider all the effects of the crisis on employees, customers and the business as a whole. In order to obtain the expected results from a crisis management team, it is important to involve all team members. Employee involvement is interpreted as the extent to which employees feel employed in their workplaces and in investing maximum knowledge in their work to produce added value. In a crisis situation, it is necessary to have employees who use their energy, hearts and minds to drive the organization to overcome all the negative effects of a crisis.

***Composition of the crisis management team**

Crisis management teams are generally cross-cutting (James, 2010), composed of representatives and managers connected to key organizational processes who have specific knowledge, skills and experience. A complex of talents and competencies ensures the management

of successful crises and the certainty of achieving the planned results. Team members provide effective leadership and support in times of stress. The members of the crisis management team who are considered mandatory are the owner or director, the top management, the employees in the communication department, the employees in the human resources department and a project manager (Kling, 2020). The crisis management team should include front office employees (sales, customer relations, marketing) and back office employees (finance, procurement, quality, legal department, risk management, security, safety and health on site). provide a variety of knowledge, skills and experiences (Jaeger, 2020). The key goal of forming a cross-functional crisis management team is to provide an overview of the organization and to quickly communicate all relevant circumstances within the entire organization (Barton, 2001). Experience has shown that the formation of a cross-functional crisis management team creates a sense of security that the response to a crisis will be adequate (Fearn-Banks, 2007), (Pearson C. M., 1997). However, the effectiveness of a crisis management team depends not only on the composition of the team (selection of team members and their roles), but also on the correct size of the team, knowledge of team members, leadership and defined team rules and rules of conduct. . (King III, 2002). The leader of the crisis management team should encourage team members to be actively involved in the exchange of knowledge and in the process of formulating crisis recovery strategies (Wooten, 2008). In addition, each member of the crisis management team should have a clearly defined description of their duties and responsibilities regarding the role assigned to them in the team. A team role is a set of expected behaviors that suit each team member. It is a habit for each team member to behave in a precisely defined way following the role assigned to him (Belbin, 1993). Forming a team involves hiring members who will be given the roles of lead coordinator who stimulates new ideas, evaluator who considers and evaluates alternatives, implementers, researchers and finalists. One of the potential obstacles to the functioning of a crisis management team is the overlapping of tasks in a situation where team members do not have clearly defined responsibilities and responsibilities, but rather carry out all ad-hoc activities. In crisis situations, where circumstances change rapidly, it is particularly important to ensure that each employee has a precise role, which corresponds to that employee's knowledge and skills.

It is clear from what has been said so far that it is necessary for any organization to be prepared with a crisis management plan, which may not make it the market leader in the field, but at least it will help reduce or even eliminate the negative effects. of such events. Therefore, there is a growing recognition among corporations that crisis management needs to be institutionalized and all key business functions need to revolve around crisis prevention and identification and their management as an integral part of the planning process. and organization of the company's activity. Today, organizations need to take a detailed approach and establish a solid contingency plan of which crisis management is only one element. To be useful, crisis management must be permanently incorporated into the organization's corporate management system. Crisis management contains three sequential objectives. The first, the ideal, is to prevent crises when possible. The second, if a crisis does occur, is to change the negative effects it could have on the company or product. The third is to provide a platform for the future of the company. The outcome of a crisis always has to do with the readiness of the organization to respond to the negative effects of the crisis and how loyal management is to the organization's missions and goals.

Research methodology

A Likert scale called "Formation and operation of the crisis management team" which consists of 15 statements was created with the aim to examine the functioning of the crisis management teams. Respondents were asked to select a number from 1 to 5 for each of the statements in accordance with the level of their agreement or disagreement (1 – strongly disagree, 5 – strongly agree).

The research was conducted using a specially designed online questionnaire, consisting of several groups of questions: (1) questions related to the members of the crisis management team (gender, seniority in the organization, job); (2) questions related to the organization (place, industry, number of employees); (3) questions regarding the formation of the crisis management team; (4) questions regarding the functioning and decisions taken by the crisis management team; (5) questions highlighting the views on the most important issues, difficulties and challenges they faced during the crisis. Between September and October 2020, a total of 115 members of the crisis management teams completed the questionnaire.

Main information about the organizations in which the crisis management teams operate

The members of the crisis management team that participated in this research come from three different regions of Romania: Moldova (56.5%), Muntenia (30.5%), Transilvania (13%). Regarding the size of organizations measured by the number of employees, the largest number (42%) are medium-sized organizations with between 50 and 249 employees. 24% of the sample consisted of small organizations, 27% of large organizations and only 7% were micro-organizations. The largest number of team members who participated in this research work in private sector organizations (65%), while 39% work in public sector organizations. When it comes to the core activities of organizations, most members of the crisis management team work in education (31%), production (15%) and health care (20%). About one third of the members of the crisis management team come from the banking and financial sector (7.3%), trade (8.4%), consulting (6.4%), state authorities (7.5%) and transport and logistics (4.6%).

Main information on members of crisis management teams

If we analyze the gender structure, we can see almost an equal number of male and female members of crisis management teams (51% men and 49% women).

More than half of the respondents have over 10 years of work experience in the organization (52%), while 27% have from 6 to 10 years, and 21% have from 1 to 5 years of work experience. Only a small number of team members have less than 1 year of work experience in that organization. The experience and intrinsic knowledge of the organization and its processes are very important factors in addressing crises. This result is positive because a crisis management team should have adequate work experience and knowledge about the organization.

Of the total number of respondents, 109 answered the question on the size (number of

members) of the crisis management team. The smallest crisis management team consists of 2 members, while the largest has 37 team members (the organization is large in terms of number of employees). A mistake in the process of forming a team in large organizations is that a maximum of ten team members are considered optimal for the proper functioning of the team. The research results showed that the average number of team members in the crisis management team was 7.34

More than half of the organizations (52.5%) did not set up a crisis management team before the advent of COVID-19, while 50% of the organizations did not have a crisis management plan. These results showed that more than half of the organizations were not prepared for the crisis that took place.

Results regarding the operation, decisions and solutions of the crisis management teams

A Likert scale from 1-5 was created called “Formation and operation of the crisis management team”, which consists of 15 statements, in order to determine the functioning of the crisis management teams. Respondents were asked to choose a number from 1 to 5 for each of the statements, depending on their level of agreement or disagreement (1 - total disagreement, 5 - total agreement).

All statements have an average value greater than 4, which is a good and positive result. The highest average value is given to the statement that all members of the crisis management team are committed to a common goal (4.50), which reflects a great unity of team members and their common vision. The second highest average value is given to the statement that communication channels have been established fairly quickly within the team (4.45), which means that there is a continuous and real flow of information between team members.

Table 1: Average values for the answers to the questionnaires regarding the Training and Solutions of the Crisis Management Team

Statements	Mean
Team members come from different parts of the organization (different organizational units)	4.11
The team responded quickly to the first signs of a crisis to prevent possible business losses	4.19
Team members fully understand their role in the team.	4.14
The new roles of team members are largely the same as their pre-crisis roles	4.03
All members of the crisis management team have a common goal.	4.25
The team has the resources to function normally.	4.12
The team frequently takes steps to minimize any losses and prevent escalating problems.	4.24
The team adapts its decisions quickly to new circumstances.	4.33

The team makes timely, important decisions.	4.29
Team members analyze how their decisions will affect the entire organization.	4.21
There is consensus among team members.	4.23
The communication channels were established easily and quickly within the team.	4.42
Communication between team members is effective.	4.34
Communication between team members is fair and open.	4.17
The team quickly shares relevant information with other teams and other employees.	4.23

Source: Authors' calculations based on SPSS

Results showed that:

- 78.5% of respondents accept that team members come from different departments of the organization.
- 79.6% of respondents agree that team members understand that the way they make decisions will have consequences for the entire organization.
- 79.1% of respondents are aware that team members fully understand their role in the team.
- 76.7% of respondents stated that the new roles of team members largely match their pre-crisis responsibilities. Almost 16% of respondents have a neutral attitude towards this statement.
- 80.5% of respondents stated that the team responded correctly to the first signs of crisis to prevent possible business losses.
- 88.7% of respondents stated that all members of the crisis management team have a common goal.
- 84.5% of respondents agree that the team is constantly taking steps to reduce any losses and prevent problems from growing.
- 75.9% of respondents agree that the team has the necessary resources to function properly.
- 87.8% of respondents agree that communication channels were quickly established within the team.
- 85.1% of respondents stated that communication between team members is effective.
- 80.3% of respondents agree that communication between team members is based on trust and sincerity.
- 82.4 of the respondents agree that the team quickly shares all relevant information with other employees.

The results of the research showed that the crisis management teams responded correctly to the first signs of crisis. The members of those teams reacted quickly and in real time to the crisis, which allowed the organization to carry out its processes and activities without blockages and with minimal losses. In addition, the research results showed that training the crisis management team brought real benefits to the organization by reducing losses and blocking activity: members were able to contribute to a common goal and strategy with their knowledge, expertise, skills and experience.

The results of communication in crisis management teams are also favorable, as one of the key challenges for organizations during the COVID-19 pandemic was how to stay connected during physical distance. Quickly established communication channels, with correct, open, sincere and real-time communication are of great importance in a crisis situation. This type of communication therefore leads to mutual trust between team members, greater efficiency, commitment and better results. Crisis management teams had to face challenges in their operation at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic crisis. To identify them, the last question in the questionnaire was opened, allowing respondents to mention the important issues, obstacles and challenges they faced during the operation of the crisis management team. Out of the total, only eleven members of the crisis management teams answered this question, stating that the important problems, obstacles and challenges were:

- Establishing a new model of operation and communication;
- Different opinions and confusion between team members;
- Lack of equipment necessary for the efficient operation of the team;
- Poor communication - information overload, ambiguities, delayed feedback;
- Insecurity, worry, fear, nervousness, anxious reactions of some employees;
- Team cohesion in the first days;
- Lack of consensus among all team members in the decision-making process;
- The need to make quick decisions;
- Setting priorities when there are a large number of activities;
- Speed of reaction to new information, rules and changes.

The occurrence of these problems is not a surprise, because they are constantly present in the first two stages of team development - the training stage, when there is confusion, tension, conflict and nervousness of team members, and the consolidation stage, when team members begin to -understands their obligations and responsibilities, but when there are still many disagreements, conflicts, lack of trust and cohesion. Forming teams to perform requires a planned approach, sustained effort, time and energy.

Discussion, implications and limitations of the research

The results of the research showed that the crisis management teams in the organizations responded correctly to the challenges caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

The members of the crisis management team came from different departments of the organization, having a common goal and sharing the same vision of responding urgently to the crisis to prevent business losses and protect the health of employees. Each member of the crisis management team used their experience and knowledge to solve problems and propose solutions, taking into account the overall functioning and results of the organization. In addition, team members had different knowledge, skills, opinions about the crisis, different ways of thinking and expertise, and adopted a holistic approach to decision-making. Such training of team members allows the organization to cover all key areas of management during the crisis. Many team members have understood their new roles in the crisis management team, which were largely in

line with their responsibilities before the crisis. In general, the most important factor for effective teamwork is that team members know their responsibilities and have an understanding of the overall situation.

According to the results, most team members had all the resources and tools to act and make decisions. Communication channels were established quickly - communication was efficient, open and honest, with information flow quickly in decision making. As a result, members of the crisis management teams built and increased mutual trust and responded immediately to new challenges. The lack of ability to respond to new information during a crisis can be very dangerous for organizations, but the massive development and use of modern digital technologies as one of the realities of the 21st century has made it possible for organizations to quickly establish new ways of operating.

Most existing opinions about teams and teamwork assume a stable environment and do not cover the key features of a crisis situation (uncertainty, dynamics, time pressure, changed business environment). In this paper, these topics were investigated by examining how teams functioned in the crisis situation caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. It is clear that this type of crisis will be present in the future as well, so more and more attention is being paid to the effective and efficient functioning of crisis management teams. For this reason, this paper can be useful to managers, but also to all members of crisis management teams.

The research performed has certain limitations such as the sample size. The reasons for the low response rate may be the commitment of the members of the crisis management teams in consolidating the business, as well as a large number of various surveys conducted during that period (September-October 2020) in order to explore the activity of companies during the COVID-19 pandemic. The design and testing of the questionnaire have been developed to ensure that the investigation tool is suitable for the public, this represents an important step in the development of the final version of the questionnaire, allowing the improvement of unclear questions and the detection of errors beforehand. Following the field testing, the questionnaire will be improved to include some questions related to the results obtained by the crisis management teams. Thus, future research will gather more information from a sample that will include 400 respondents to provide a comprehensive analysis of the responses to crisis situations by the specially established management teams. Therefore, the results obtained cannot be generalized. Another limitation is that this research refers only to people in Romania. Future research on this topic should also include people from other countries, taking into account other variables, such as cultural differences.

Conclusion

When a crisis arises, a single person cannot adequately cope with the challenges posed by its development. Adequate response to a crisis in an organization requires a coordinated effort by the various employees in all departments of the organization. One of the important activities in organizations when facing a crisis is activating or forming a crisis management team in order to cope with the challenges of the crisis as best as possible for organizations and all stakeholders.

This paper indicates that even those organizations that do not have permanent crisis management teams can respond correctly to a crisis if they decide in real time to form a crisis management team and respond to the challenges posed by the consequences of the crisis. The results of the research conducted in September and October 2020, which included 1115 members of the crisis management teams, showed that those teams were able to perform and respond correctly to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The members of the crisis management team responded in real time to the first signs of the crisis. They made decisions quickly using an approach based on different knowledge, skills and experience, precise team roles, commitment to the same goal, communication based on trust, honesty and efficiency.

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