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Introduction: approaching organizational learning through crisis management

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Zahed Ghaderi and Alexandros Paraskevas

# 1 Introduction

## 1. Approaching organizational learning through crisis management

Do organizations learn from crises? And if they do, how? These questions have been an ongoing debate among scholars for over two decades. This debate has focused on the pessimist versus optimist perspective, inquiring into whether organizations are capable of learning from a crisis (c.f. Antonacopoulou & Sheaffer, 2014; Broekema, et al., 2017; Moynihan, 2008; Smith and Elliot, 2007; Zhou et al., 2018) and on the individual versus organizational perspective towards identifying the learning agents (Argyris & Schön, 1996, Deverell, 2013; Ellinger et al., 2015; Stemn et al., 2018; Weick & Ashford, 2001). There is full consensus that organizational crises are conducive to the process of intensive organizational knowledge acquisition as, more often than not, these crises are unique in their nature and the actions undertaken for their management are steps to the unknown. Crises also trigger organizational changes that would otherwise be impossible to happen. Therefore, shaping the ability of an organization to learn from a crisis is an important antecedent for its capability to cope with future crises.

Yet, despite the significance of this topic, little research has been thus far undertaken on how tourism and hospitality organizations learn from crises and their management process, and if they actually deploy any of this learning in their risk and crisis management planning. An analysis of the extant literature indicates that organizational learning from crises can be classified into two distinct streams of research. The first stream includes studies that identify organizational learning as either a separate stage or a part of the crisis management cycle, i.e., the resolution and feedback stage (c.f., Anderson, 2006; Blackman & Ritchie, 2008; Ghaderi et al., 2012; Hystad & Keller, 2008; Pforr & Hosie, 2008; Ritchie, 2009; Santana, 2004). In these studies, organizational learning mostly happens during the resolution stage of crisis and disaster management (differences between crisis and disaster management are elaborated in Chapter 2 – section 3). It is a form of reflective learning' where the crisis does not only present an opportunity to acquire knowledge that can be useful in dealing with future crises but also enables the organization to see more clearly its strengths and weaknesses and evaluate the effectiveness of its crisis response. This evaluation can point to problems related to the operational model not only of the organization but of the entire tourism value chain. For example, Blackman and Ritchie (2008) noted the important role of organizational learning in improving the potential efficiency of crisis management strategies, particularly at the resolution stage of tourism crises for Destination Marketing Organizations (Ritchie & Jiang, 2019). This kind of reflective crisis learning must be translated into knowledge and new practices if it is to change the organization.

The second stream of tourism and hospitality crisis research includes studies that consider lessons learned from the analysis of causes and consequences of the crisis and contemplate

possible measures that need to be taken to address similar situations in the future. The methodological approaches used in this literature are predominantly qualitative due to their exploratory nature to understand action and reaction to crisis phenomena (c.f., Faulkner, 2001; Ghaderi et al., 2014; Henderson, 2007; Ritchie, 2004). This stream's contribution is more in the direction of learning through understanding the crisis and its management cycle. The knowledge that is acquired from this type of more "strategic learning" is the feedback that organizations gain from analyzing how a crisis emerged and what actions proved to be effective or ineffective. A significant part of this stream is also devoted to the impact of crises on hospitality and tourism and employs a mix of quantitative and qualitative techniques for the estimation of this impact, mostly in monetary terms (Blake & Sinclair, 2003; Blake et al., 2003; Pizam & Fleischer, 2002).

It is evident that a knowledge gap still exists on how tourism and hospitality organizations learn from crises and how they manage the knowledge they generate from them. This gap triggered the creation of this edited book, in which several contributing scholars are making stronger links between organizational learning and crisis management and explore these concepts at different levels and depth as well as in different geographic contexts across the globe.

## 2. Structure of the book

**Zahed Ghaderi, Ahmad Puad Mat Som, and Jia Wang** set the scene for the book by defining organizational learning and presenting an integrated model of organizational learning for crisis management. However, their study among 25 key hospitality, travel, and tourism organizations in Malaysia showed that only the ones that are highly crisis-prone (airlines and hotels) had set up their own crisis or disaster management plans and focused on double-loop organizational learning whereas other key players, such as travel agencies and governmental organizations did not.

The second chapter by **Alexandros Paraskevas, Levent Altinay, Jacqueline McLean, and Chris Cooper** look at learning and knowledge flows to enhance the resilience of tourism organizations and destinations in crisis situations, strengthen their defense mechanisms, limit potential damages, and allows them to bounce back to normalcy faster. The contributors use critical incident interviews with 21 tourism executives around the world to identify the types of crisis knowledge they employ in the advent of a crisis. They explore the crisis knowledge management processes and flows they implement within their organizations and propose a framework for the governance of crisis knowledge.

As crises can have a significant impact on fundamental dimensions of an organization, **Christos Kakarouglas and Theodoros Stavrinoudis** examine the effects of COVID-19 on human resource management aspects of organizational culture and the learning opportunities that emerge from these effects, in the context of the Greek hospitality industry. The findings of their study show how hotel executives can learn lessons that will help them deal with the negative consequences caused on the human aspect of the organizational culture of their hotels, and how this learning can effectively shape a new organizational culture.

The next chapter looks also at organizational culture but at a different dimension: the learning culture of organizations and specifically about learning from a crisis. Using the experiences of Japanese hoteliers from the cascading crisis caused by the Great East Japan Earthquake in 2011, **Alexandros Paraskevas** explores the factors that underpin an effective crisis learning stewardship and proposes a framework for organizations to instill and enhance a crisis learning culture.

In a more conceptual discussion, **Ron Fisher, Mark Francis, and Claire Haven-Tang** present a four-stage action-learning model for crisis management that can facilitate

organizational learning and improve response in future crises. The first two stages focus on the environmental level, where opportunities are identified through a situational analysis then further considered in terms of required resources. In stage three organizational attributes are matched against opportunities then strategies and tactics are developed. Stage four is the embedding of knowledge into the collective memory of the organization, the “refreezing” step of the change process.

Looking at how tourism organizations learn and at less explored ways for learning acquisition, **Sara Sadat Makian and Mohammad Nematpour** explore foresight thinking and scenario planning as a tool for organizational learning crisis management at a tourism destination level. They discuss how scenario planning can extend existing knowledge, assumptions, and attitudes about future tourism and how it can enable management to assess the impact of various driving forces of change on the destination's tourism activities and evaluate the likely impact of their alternative crisis responses.

Organizational learning does not come naturally, and as discussed in previous chapters, requires a culture and a strategy for its development. This development does not come easy and organizations attempting it are normally facing several challenges. These barriers to learning are explored by **Juan Manuel Tello Contreras** who explores this topic in the context of managing the COVID-19 pandemic in Mexico. Although the mainstream crisis literature discusses extensively barriers to organizational learning from crises, this study in Mexico focuses on cultural differences within the country, political barriers, differences in time pressure tolerance, insufficient competence levels, lack of leadership, local patriotism, and rigid hierarchical structures.

Once these barriers are overcome and organizational learning is finally generated or acquired, it must become part of the organization's entire “fabric” through dissemination and institutionalization. **Wendy Rop** proposes institutionalization of organizational learning generated before, during, and after a crisis into pillars/functions of a tourism crisis management framework: services, human resources, information, products and technologies, financing as well as leadership and governance.

Institutionalized crisis learning can be transferred across organizations but also across industries and sectors. The advent of such knowledge transfer is investigated by **Ivan Sikora** who identifies “hidden links” on crisis management elements observed between aviation and hospitality. The long history of aviation dealing with crises on the global stage makes it a potentially valuable place to look for inspiration and indication of how to design, operate and improve crisis management approach and systems in tourism. He argues that explicit and tacit knowledge identification facilitates knowledge transfer and learning sharing between the two sectors while organizational learning strategies and methods from the aviation map to comparable characteristics in hospitality.

The last four chapters of the book take a more “case study” approach and look at organizational learning from responses to specific crises.

**Mehmet Ertas and Burçin Kirlar-Can** investigate the organizational learning of hotels in Denizli, Turkey, from a series of crises over the years and identified the lessons learned and implemented. Their study showed a general lack of proactivity, general crisis unpreparedness, and lessons recorded but not actually learned. The crisis responses were more informed by trial-and-error experimentation or makeshift crisis management policies rather than institutionalized crisis knowledge.

**Alfonso Vargas-Sánchez and Diego Rodríguez-Toubes** look at organizational learning from the COVID-19 pandemic in the tourism sector in Spain and how this crisis has challenged extant crisis management models at tourism destination level. Pretty much as Tello Contreras in Mexico they argue that what happened in Spain cannot be understood if particularities such as the political-administrative landscape of the State as well as the representation and weight

of the tourism sector in dialogues with public administrations and other social agents are overlooked because they can become not only barriers to learning but also to effective crisis response.

Across the Atlantic, **Bingjie Liu-Lastres**, **Alexa Bufkin**, and **Hany Kim** explore the effects of organizational learning on crisis communication based on an empirical evaluation of New York City hotels' social media strategies during the 2010 bed bug crisis. They found that although the responses reflected a learning curve where NYC hotels have been steadily improved their crisis response but there are still important gaps that show some inability or unwillingness to learn as evidenced also in the Denizli chapter whilst the authors propose specific areas for improvement.

Finally, **Zahed Ghaderi**, **Ian Paterson**, **Ahmad Puad Mat Som**, and **Zahra Behboodi** investigate crisis knowledge management in the tourism supply chain in Iran. Exemplifying the crisis in a sanction-affected country, they reveal how the lack of proper organizational learning and knowledge management throughout the Iranian tourism supply chain rendered its key players incapable to effectively respond to the complex crises they are facing.

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