The Politics of Crisis Management

Crisis management has become a defining feature of contemporary governance. In times of crisis, communities and members of organizations expect their leaders to minimize the impact of the crisis at hand, while critics and bureaucratic competitors try to seize the moment to blame incumbent rulers and their policies. In this extreme environment, policy makers must somehow establish a sense of normality, and foster collective learning from the crisis experience. In this uniquely comprehensive analysis, the authors examine how leaders deal with the strategic challenges they face, the political risks and opportunities they encounter, the errors they make, the pitfalls they need to avoid, and the paths away from crisis they may pursue. This book is grounded in over a decade of collaborative, cross-national case study research, and offers an invaluable multidisciplinary perspective. This is an original and important contribution from experts in public policy and international security.

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*Public Leadership under Pressure*

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Contents

List of figures and table  page vii
Acknowledgments  page ix

1 Crisis management in political systems: five leadership challenges  page 1
  1.1 Crisis management and public leadership  1
  1.2 The nature of crisis  2
  1.3 The ubiquity of crisis  4
  1.4 Crisis management: leadership perspectives  7
  1.5 Leadership in crisis: five critical tasks  10

2 Sense making: grasping crises as they unfold  page 18
  2.1 What the hell is going on?  18
  2.2 Barriers to crisis recognition: organizational limitations  19
  2.3 Psychological dimensions of sense making: stress and performance  28
  2.4 Precarious reality-testing: constraints  30
  2.5 Conditions for reliable reality-testing  35
  2.6 Conclusion  37

3 Decision making: critical choices and their implementation  page 42
  3.1 The myth of chief executive choice  42
  3.2 Leaders as crisis decision makers  43
  3.3 Leaders and their crisis teams: group dynamics  45
  3.4 How governmental crisis decisions “happen”  51
  3.5 From decisions to responses: the importance of crisis coordination  56
  3.6 Putting crisis leadership in its place  63

4 Meaning making: crisis management as political communication  page 69
  4.1 Crisis communication as politics  69
  4.2 Crisis communication in a mediated political world  70
  4.3 The battle for credibility  78
  4.4 Meaning-making strategies: symbolic crisis management  82
  4.5 Conclusion  87
Contents

5 End games: crisis termination and accountability 91
   5.1 It ain’t over till it’s over 91
   5.2 The political challenge of crisis termination 93
   5.3 Crisis termination and the challenges of accountability 99
   5.4 Blame games and the politics of meaning making 103
   5.5 Accountability, blame games, and democracy 111

6 Learning from crises and the politics of reform 115
   6.1 Never again! 115
   6.2 Learning from crisis 117
   6.3 Change without learning: crisis as opportunity for reform 122
   6.4 Implementing lessons of crisis: an impossible task? 130
   6.5 The perils of opportunity: from crisis-induced reforms to reform-induced crises 132

7 How to deal with crisis: lessons for prudent leadership 137
   7.1 Introduction 137
   7.2 Grasping the nature of crises 138
   7.3 Improving crisis sense making 140
   7.4 Improving crisis decision making 144
   7.5 Improving crisis meaning making 148
   7.6 Improving crisis termination 150
   7.7 Improving crisis learning and reform craft 152
   7.8 Preparing for crises: concluding reflections 156

References 158
Index 176
Figures and Table

**FIGURES**

5.1 Four idealypical states of crisis closure  
5.2 Actor choices in crisis-induced blame games  
6.1 Alternative post-crisis futures  

**TABLE**

5.1 Playing the blame game: argumentative tactics
Acknowledgments

The writing of this book took place during the long aftermath of what is now simply known as “9/11.” In the very last stages of rewriting this book, the tsunami catastrophe occurred. Whilst proof-reading, “7/7” shocked London. These crises highlight many of the issues we discuss in this book. They illustrate the point we wish to make in this book: crises are political at heart.

When a society or one of its key institutions encounters a major crisis, the politics of public policy making do not – as official rhetoric frequently suggests – abate. On the contrary, political rivalries about the interpretation of fast-moving events and their effects are part of the drama that crisis management entails in modern society.

Crises make and break political careers, shake bureaucratic pecking orders and shape organizational destinies. Crises fix the spotlight on those who govern. Heroes and villains emerge with a speed and intensity quite unknown to “politics as usual.” Many seasoned policy makers understand this catalytic momentum in crises. They may talk about national unity and the need for consensus in the face of shared predicaments, but this reflects only part of their reasoning. Their other calculus, less visible to the public, concerns contested issues, dilemmas of responsibility and accountability, of avoiding blame and claiming credit.

This book captures our ideas about the political challenges and realities of public leadership in times of crisis. We formulate five core tasks of crisis leadership: sense making, decision making, meaning making, terminating, and learning. Rather than using this book to report and integrate the manifold research findings, we adopt an argumentative approach. In each chapter, we ask a key question and offer our central claim about the leadership task at hand.

This monograph is an exercise in theory building and policy reflection rather than in theory testing and policy design. It offers a newly integrated approach that social scientists may use to study crises. It also aims at practitioners in and beyond the public sector. We offer them – especially
in the final chapter – a condensed exploration of perennial pitfalls and strategic considerations that we believe should inform crisis leadership.

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