Organisational factors that favour the development of the unity of effort needed to ensure organisational adaptability

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Abstract: Events such as COVID-19 and the related unforeseen issues highlight the importance of adaptability for crisis management. Since this kind of situation is hard to predict, planning alone does not allow for speedy, effective emergence from the crisis. Many studies have sought to characterise adaptability and develop tools to analyse it before and after an event. However, in the case of a long-lasting event such as COVID-19, organisations must be able to analyse adaptability during the disruption in order to make the necessary adjustments. Work done by the CRP with its various industrial partners has made it possible to suggest organisational factors on which organisations can rely to support the unity of effort needed for adaptability. To promote the implementation and analysis of these factors during disruptions, the authors propose the concept of sense of coherence to execute speedy diagnostics and identify the crisis management factors that must be adjusted.

Keywords: resilience; organisational adaptability; crisis management; crisis cell; unity of effort; sense of coherence; consensus building; situational awareness; operational management requirements; OMRs; organisational constraints.

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1 Introduction

The environment in which organisations operate is constantly changing and new disruptions occur whose consequences are difficult to predict. Although business continuity planning is essential, it is not sufficient to ensure that organisations are resilient, in other words able to maintain or restore acceptable operations regardless of the disruption they have experienced (Robert, 2010). Indeed, even though events such as the H1N1 flu in 2009 constituted a context in which organisations developed continuity plans to cover scenarios involving a massive loss of employees, many specific features of the COVID-19 event were not among the assumptions taken into consideration in that planning. Thus, even though government guidelines specified that it is important to take account of the duration of a pandemic and the shocks they cause when planning for business continuity (CME, 2009; MDEIE, 2009), many organisations had not integrated this information. They were also not prepared for governments to impose measures upon them that could change how they did business (Hémond et al., 2021).

Various strategies were developed to get through the public health crisis. Thus, some countries decided to maintain normal operations, whereas others imposed measures on organisations such as telework and social distancing within offices. In this kind of context, it is crucial for organisations to develop their adaptability, namely to be able to make a 'temporary adjustment of disruption management processes based on the actual disruption' [Micouleau et al., (2020), p.150]. How can organisations foster the development of adaptability? What role does unity of effort play in adaptability? How can organisations quickly analyse this during a crisis and make the necessary adjustments? The answers to these questions will be suggested here on the basis of a study in Canada, specifically Quebec, where the Centre Risque and Performance's (CRP) industrial partners are located. First, the context of the study will be described, followed by an explanation of the research methodology. Finally, we will examine the concept of sense of coherence, as a potential rapid diagnostic tool, and propose the organisational factors that affect the unity of effort needed to develop adaptability.

2 Context of the study

The COVID-19 pandemic has generated its share of uncertainties for the governments of various nations and for organisations whose objective is to maintain their functioning. In some cases, these uncertainties led to a stoppage of action, of varying duration, due to a lack of consensus among the different decision-making bodies. Indeed, the lack of knowledge concerning this pandemic at the global level resulted in divergent international discourses, which made different governments' decision-making processes even more complicated (Audet et al., 2022). Moreover, some organisations had never remotely envisaged that the governments of the countries in which they operated might force them to close their offices, for example (Hémond et al., 2021). These situations

worsened the stoppage of action within those organisations. And, in fact, lack of consensus, stoppage of action, and uncertainties related to the event are the main characteristics of a crisis (Denis, 2002). Consequently, the management of COVID-19 can be analysed as management of a crisis.

In the field of crisis management, it is common to analyse an organisation's past management of a crisis or to compare the management of several organisations located in the same region and impacted by the same crisis or of organisations in different places but in the same area of activity. The COVID-19 event enabled us to do a global comparison of different organisations undergoing the same crisis in real time, given that this crisis still exists. The analyses of COVID-19 carried out over the last two years by numerous researchers and discussions with the CRP's industrial partners have shown that organisations were generally not prepared for this kind of event and had to adapt in order to survive the crisis.

It also became clear that organisations' adaptation varied over the different waves of the pandemic. Thus, during the first wave, events occurred rapidly. Indeed, even though the situation concerning the development and worldwide propagation of COVID-19 was monitored and commented on, nothing led organisations to foresee that in some cases they would have to organise telework for all of their employees for several months. And organisations had never imagined that the government might impose measures such as a complete shutdown of operations. The first wave can be considered as an acute shock, that is, an intense, sudden event that threatens a system (City of Sydney, 2018), in this case the organisation. This kind of event demands an intervention and the speedy implementation of measures to limit its consequences. During this first wave, the implementation of business protection and continuity measures within organisations generally went well.

Nevertheless, as of the second wave, the disruption caused by COVID-19, which had hitherto been a shock, now became a chronic stress, namely a long-term event that affects the system's everyday operations (City of Sydney, 2018). Thus, the second wave created a sort of new reality in organisations' functioning. It then became necessary to modify organisational processes and adjust the protective and business continuity measures established during the first wave. In some cases, the implementation of measures at this stage was more difficult. Why? It is important to specify that the unit of study of this research project is organisational. The researchers are interested in the elements that an organisation can put in place to support managers in managing a crisis and not in their individual competencies. This decision was made in order to limit the factors affecting the unity of effort on which the crisis cell is able to act. Indeed, unity of effort does not aim to modify or judge individual competencies, but rather to pool these individual competencies in order to achieve a common goal (Berinato, 2010).

3 Methodology

The research project whose results are presented in this article fits into the CRP's overall research framework. This research framework involves developing a research project with industrial partners who have problems related to resilience. Each research project and the results thereof fuel the development of the concept of resilience and help to

validate the operationalisation of the concept on the ground. Thus, this research project was enriched by work done with a municipality on organisations' resilience potential (Micouleau and Robert, 2021), with drinking water treatment facilities, and within associations of municipalities.

The researchers applied an intervention research-type approach, which makes it possible to access a wider variety of knowledge about organisations and their management methods than other approaches (Hatchuel and David, 2008). To study crisis management and propose an approach to analysing adaptability, we consider it essential for researchers to be in the field and have a direct relationship with managers. Moreover, as Hatchuel (2000) points out, researchers cannot produce relevant knowledge if they are not players and stakeholders in the action. This research approach constitutes a cycle composed of four phases that are repeated until a solution validated by the environment is obtained. The four phases are definition of the problem, development of a solution, proposal of a solution and validation of the proposed solution. The case study done with a Quebec municipality, the results of which were presented by Micouleau and Robert (2021), corresponds to the first phase of the approach. It highlighted the fact that adaptability is essential to manage disruptions and that research should be done to better characterise it. In fact, even though best practices for disruption management promote the importance of developing adaptability, no methodology for doing so had been suggested to organisations. Thus, the research study with drinking water treatment plants first highlighted the importance of respecting operational management requirements (OMRs) and organisational constraints (OCs) while managing disruptions. Then research work done in collaboration with the CRP's industrial partners made it possible to characterise adaptability and identify the elements that compose it (Micouleau et al., 2020). Nevertheless, the problem of analysing adaptability remained. The various research studies carried out by the CRP with its industrial partners over the years, along with a workshop bringing together managers from different organisations affected by COVID-19, enabled us to propose a solution for this problem, which is described in this article.

4   Unity of effort: the basis for organisational unity

Within organisations' management structure, two different hierarchical levels are in place: the strategic level and the operational level. The strategic level is composed of members of senior management, who have a medium-and long-term vision of the organisation and make decisions based on its OCs. These constraints are 'conditions that must be satisfied in order to achieve the goals that have been set. Failure to respect these constraints can have consequences for an organisation's operations' [Micouleau et al., (2020), p.151]. OCs can be grouped in six classes: strategic, technical, legal or regulatory, contractual, security, and economic constraints (Bekkali, 2018). As for the operational level, departments' operations are governed by OMRs, which are conditions that must be met to achieve the objectives set for departments' and services' operations. Operational managers make management decisions based on these OMRs. During a disruption, three levels of management are established: strategic, tactical and operational. Management is ensured by deploying business continuity plans (BCPs), which correspond to 'documented information that guides an organisation to respond to a disruption and resume, recover and restore the delivery of products and services

consistent with its business continuity objectives' (ISO, 2012). The strategic level implements the measures identified in their strategic BCPs to ensure that OCs are respected during a disruption, while operational managers implement the measures identified in their operational BCPs to ensure that their OMRs are respected. However, they are also responsible for implementing the measures identified by the strategic level within their departments to ensure that the OCs are respected.

To manage the COVID-19 crisis and the stoppage of action it caused, organisations set up one or more crisis cells, which correspond to the tactical level of disruption management. Traditionally, a crisis cell acts as the interface between the organisation's strategic and operational levels. It is made up of representatives of top management and of the various departments that are essential to decision-making, such as communications and legal affairs. Decisions that are made by the cell aim to reduce the risk and the overall cost for the organisation (Renaudin, 2004). The cell is a temporary or ephemeral structure that must be set up quickly inside an organisation when a stoppage of action occurs to ensure coordination among the various departments. It acts as a crisis management leader. The alternative measures it identifies essentially aim to maintain an acceptable level of organisational functioning and necessitate trade-offs concerning the allocation of resources, roles and responsibilities within the organisation (Micouleau et al., 2020).

It is generally possible to observe two kinds of functioning at the crisis cell level: unity of command (Martin, 2007) and unity of effort (Berinato, 2010). Unity of command, a concept from the military domain, is based on respecting the chain of command. Thus, 'one commander must exercise full control over all combat forces normally operating within a given theatre of war' (Dupuy, 1955). The commander has the necessary authority to give direct orders; once orders are given, they must be transmitted by officers to the other soldiers with unfailing support (Strain, 2007). Decisions that have been made must not be questioned. Unity of command applied to crisis management within organisations implies that the crisis cell makes decisions concerning the measures to implement within the organisation, without necessarily involving operational managers. This also entails that measures must be implemented in a fail-proof way. Of course, organisations' operations are not the same as military operations and do not have such a structured hierarchy (Alavosius et al., 2005), and several emergency management specialists have highlighted the limitations of this management style in dealing with complex events (Berinato, 2010; Blum and McIntyre, 2012; Campbell, 2021).

In several organisations, the second wave of COVID-19 showed that the imposition of measures without taking account of the measures that managers had already applied within departments triggered reluctance to implement these measures. This corresponds to reserve or hesitation to act, which leads to a delay in making decisions and applying measures. But time is of the essence during a crisis. The upshot is that, when the crisis cell imposes measures, all the managers make adjustments when applying them to ensure that their own OMRs are respected. These adjustments can create disparities among different departments. The goal is to minimise these disparities to ensure that adaptation is organisation-wide and not departmental. To do this, it is recommended that the crisis cell should use unity of effort as its operational mode. Unity of effort requires that the competencies of all players be pooled to achieve a common goal (Berinato, 2010).

As mentioned above, managing an event such as COVID-19 requires organisations to adapt. However, for an organisation to adapt optimally, it has to prevent each department from adapting without consideration for the others. Adaptations and the implementation

of measures to respect OMRs can generate a coherence problem at the level of the organisation and thus compromise the respect of its OCs. Therefore it is important to ensure that all players work to achieve the common goal. Unity of effort is based on four principles: 'common understanding of the situation; common vision, goals and objectives for the mission; coordination of efforts to ensure continued coherency; [and] common measures of progress and ability to change course if necessary' [Thomas, (2013), p.6]. These principles make it possible to identify the three pillars on which unity of effort is based. The first pillar is consensus building, which corresponds to a consultative, participatory communication process that seeks to build collective intelligence concerning particular situations and then exploit them in order to innovate (Beuret, 2012). The second pillar is situational awareness, which can be defined as an organisation's capacity to detect, anticipate and manage an undesirable event (Millot et al., 2015). It is necessary for the organisation to develop a knowledge and understanding of the situation and increase its responsiveness. The third pillar is strategic planning of the assignment of roles and responsibilities and operational planning of resources. In a time of crisis management, managers may be assigned specific types of roles and responsibilities that differ from their planned or habitual roles and responsibilities (Micouleau et al., 2020). Among these new roles, active participation in the crisis cell represents a particular challenge, since managers are stakeholders in an ephemeral management structure with responsibilities that differ substantially from their everyday management. Thus, for an organisation, the challenge is to ensure that the managers concerned can really fill these new roles. Consequently, it is crucial to bear these challenges in mind when planning BCPs.

Finally, the implementation of measures requires them to be accompanied by the resources and budget necessary to apply them. If this is not done, one may observe the development of alternative internal measures, in accordance with the internal financial requirements and available resources in each department. It is therefore recommended that organisations work on their BCPs to integrate flexibility for departments that takes their OMRs into account.

As crisis management leader and coordinator, the crisis cell is responsible for developing and analysing unity of effort. In the following section, we propose organisational factors on which the organisation should rely to support the crisis cell in achieving this goal.

5 Proposed organisational factors fostering the development of unity of effort

As described above, an organisation that wants to promote the development of unity of effort should rely on factors related to consensus building and situational awareness. It should also ensure that strategic BCPs support the implementation of specific roles and responsibilities related to crisis management. Finally, it should make sure that operational BCPs integrate operational flexibility. To do this, the organisation can apply the factors listed in Table 1.

Table 1   Organisational factors fostering the development of unity of effort

Pillar of unity of effort	*Organisational factors*
Consensus building	Bilateral exchanges
	Participatory exchanges
	Consultative exchanges
	Feedback mechanisms
Situational awareness	Knowledge of the system
	Monitoring of changes in the environment
	Transmission of clear, precise instructions
Strategic planning of the assignment of roles and responsibilities and operational planning of resources	The authority to assume these temporary roles and responsibilities
	Acknowledgment of the legitimacy of these new roles and responsibilities
	Support from the strategic level and the crisis cell
	Human capacity
	Financial capacity
	Material capacity
	Technological capacity

5.1   Consensus building

The organisation should rely on the following four factors to ensure that consensus building is effective:

- *Bilateral exchanges.* Information must move from the strategic level to the operational level, but also in the other direction to enable managers to present their OMRs.

- *Participatory exchanges.* All stakeholders must take part in exchanges. In particular, it is important to ensure that all of the organisation's managers participate in decision-making by sharing their OMRs and the possible consequences of the proposed measures.

- *Consultative exchanges.* To ensure that all stakeholders understand the situation, it is important for the exchanges to allow for giving an advisory opinion; they should not be for decision-making.

- *Feedback mechanisms.* To combat the possible negative effects of consultative exchanges, such as a feeling by some participants that their opinions were not taken into consideration in decision-making, feedback mechanisms must be established. This feedback must be provided within a reasonable period, though of course adapted to the crisis.

5.2   Situational awareness

The organisation should apply the following four factors to ensure effective situational awareness:

- *Knowledge of the system.* All stakeholders must be familiar with and understand the strategic OCs, managers' OMRs and internal interdependencies.

- *Monitoring of changes in the environment.* All crisis situations change over time and consensus-building tools and principles must allow the various stakeholders to pass on any changes they have noticed in the organisation's internal and external environment. This information can then be imported into the organisation's early warning and monitoring tools so the crisis management measures can be adapted.

- *Transmission of clear, precise instructions.* This enables managers to comply with decision-making and avoids divergent application due to differing interpretations in different departments.

5.3   Strategic planning of the assignment of roles and responsibilities and operational planning of resources

Planning the assignment of roles and responsibilities is a good business continuity practice that is stipulated in practice guides such as the BCI's (2018). Nevertheless, to help organisations with the challenge posed by the ephemeral crisis management structure, it is recommended that this planning be supported by the following factors:

- *The authority to assume these temporary roles and responsibilities.* The organisation must ensure that managers have the necessary authority to assume these new roles and responsibilities and thus to efficiently implement crisis management measures.

- *Acknowledgment of the legitimacy of these new roles and responsibilities.* The organisation needs to ensure that the assignment of roles and responsibilities is understood and accepted and thus prevent their being called into question.

- *Support from the strategic level and the crisis cell.* The organisation must ensure that managers have the necessary support (access to information, training, etc.) to assume these new roles and responsibilities but also to apply crisis management measures.

The information associated with these factors should be identified in strategic BCPs because they require an organisation-wide vision.

The allocation of resources must be provided for in the operational BCPs, as mentioned in good business continuity practices (BCI, 2018; ISO, 2012). Nevertheless, we propose here that resource planning should support the consensus building and situational awareness mechanisms. To do this, we propose that operational BCPs incorporate the notion of flexibility, or margin of manoeuvre, described by Micouleau and Robert (2021). This corresponds to the estimated available time to launch action plans, as estimated by managers, before the disruption significantly affects their operations. It is advisable for a temporal flexibility limit to be identified for each of a department's OMRs. The crisis cell can then be made aware of these limits and will therefore have an idea of the potential consequences of its decision-making and the evolution of the disruption for the organisation's operations. In addition, resource flexibility limits for OMRs should be identified for the same reason as the temporal limits. They should cover the following four capacities:

- *Human capacity:* the necessary staff to apply the measures.

- *Financial capacity:* the budget needed to apply the measures.

- *Material capacity:* all the physical materials (equipment, premises, etc.) required to apply the measures.

- *Technological capacity:* the technological tools needed to apply the measures.

The identification of these flexibility limits will make it possible to improve consultative exchanges by enabling all departments to present the same kinds of information and highlight their OMRs and the decisions' consequences for them. These limits will also support situational awareness mechanisms by providing knowledge of the organisational elements that should be monitored.

Furthermore, given that the implementation of certain exceptional measures may demand specific expertise, the strategic level must ensure that managers have access to the complementary expertise needed to implement crisis management measures that differ from their everyday activities.

The proposed factors encourage shared responsibility for crisis management. The strategic level and the crisis cell are responsible for implementing the factors related to consensus building and situational awareness to support the creation of unity of effort within the organisation. They are also responsible for integrating the factors supporting the assignment of roles and responsibilities into their strategic planning. Meanwhile, operational managers are responsible for changing their operational planning to integrate information concerning their OMRs and flexibility limits.

These organisational factors must be put in place before a disruption occurs and must be integrated into the organisation's operations. To this end, training activities must be provided. This training should prepare managers for their crisis management roles and responsibilities and prepare other members to participate in crisis management. It must also teach staff members about the consensus building and situational awareness tools and mechanisms. To analyse unity of effort and adjust and improve crisis management functioning, a quick diagnostic tool is proposed: sense of coherence.

6   Using sense of coherence to analyse an organisation's unity of effort

The objective of the research project is to allow organisations to increase their adaptability. As described above, during COVID-19, some managers considered that the measures identified were not aligned with their OMRs. This was reflected in an adjustment of the measures and the creation of disparities among departments. To reduce these disparities, it is recommended that organisations create unity of effort, which is done by establishing the organisational factors proposed above. Nevertheless, since situations change, it is important for an organisation to adjust its operations and management during the disruption. To do so, it must be able to analyse unity of effort and how it changes over time. When managing a crisis, time is a critical resource and it is not realistic to ask organisations to do in-depth analyses of their operations several times over. Thus, it is important for them to have a tool that will enable them to carry out speedy diagnostics and highlight the elements that should be analysed in more detail. Applying diagnostics will allow them to identify gaps between the crisis management

decisions that were taken and managers' representations of those decisions and their coherence with their OMRs. These are the gaps that the organisation will attempt to reduce to favour unity of effort in its ranks. Such diagnostics should be speedy and should focus on divergences from OMRs, to prevent debates breaking out concerning the quality of decisions and the people in charge, particularly during crisis management. Thus, this tool must make it possible to obtain results fast and get operational managers involved. Consequently, the use of this tool should in itself foster unity of effort within the organisation by supporting consensus building among the various players involved.

What kind of tool could provide such results? Managers have in-depth knowledge of their own departments' operations and are accustomed to managing disruptions. They use their knowledge and experience to contextualise the situation and thus to develop their judgement of a certain lack of coherence, or lack thereof, in the implementation of crisis management measures. The construction over time of this subjective judgement therefore develops a sense of coherence in respect of crisis management. Managers' sense of coherence corresponds to their representation of the alignment of the crisis cell's decisions with their OMRs. According to Bédard (2016) and Audy (2020), representation as a process of event evaluation means an ongoing process of familiarisation among people who have more knowledge about an observed event, as is the case for managers. We propose capitalising on managers' sense of coherence concerning decisions made by the crisis cell in relation to their departments' OMRs. Thus, the crisis cell could send a questionnaire to operational managers regarding their sense of coherence in respect of the crisis management decisions taken and their OMRs. The compilation of the results could give the crisis cell a picture of operational managers' sense of coherence and enable it to identify any organisational factors that must be analysed in more depth. The use of this tool would constitute a speedy diagnostic of unity of effort and factors that need to be strengthened. Finally, this tool could help various crisis management players to become involved through constructive, participatory exchanges focusing on the development of unity of effort.

7   Discussion

In order for the factors suggested above to participate in the development and support of unity of effort within an organisation, they need to be integrated into the organisation's culture. Thus the behaviours and values associated with those factors should be shared by most or all of the organisation's employees. To this end, it is recommended that activities and training sessions for employees be identified in order to implement these factors during a period of calm and allow employees to take ownership of the new way of functioning before a crisis arises. In addition, technological support should be set up to promote consensus building and situational awareness. Integration into organisational culture and the provision of technological support should be done at the same time, since technology is not an end in itself but a tool to support the changes necessary for consensus building and situational awareness.

The development of unity of effort within an organisation further to the implementation of the proposed organisational factors raises the question of the organisation's size. Indeed, for large organisations such as multinational corporations that may have locations in many different countries, building a consensus among all the players involved may seem complex, even illusory. It is true that this kind of organisation

needs to be studied from a different angle. The complexity of such organisations also calls into question the effectiveness of sense of coherence as a speedy diagnostic tool for unity of effort. In actual fact, this kind of organisation will have many crisis cells, and measures that respond to the organisation's strategic requirements may be adapted to different geographic realities, for example. Thus, managers would not be questioned about the same measures, which could undermine the results. Consequently, the concept of sense of coherence as a tool for quickly diagnosing unity of effort seems more appropriate for small and medium-sized enterprises.

The results presented in this article clarify the development of organisational adaptability through the application of unity of effort. They constitute a first step in the development of a methodology to analyse organisations' adaptability. The next step should consist in testing the concept of sense of coherence and the organisational factors within sample organisations. That would make it possible to identify which elements of the methodology can be generalised and which ones need to be adapted to each organisation's specific reality.

Finally, we decided that the priority was to study the organisational elements on which the crisis cell can act to create and maintain unity of effort. Nevertheless, the CRP's industrial partners have already pointed out that individual competencies such as managers' management style and employees' competence in terms of the roles and responsibilities assigned to them have an impact on crisis management. Thus, it would be relevant to study in more detail the effects that managers' individual competencies can have on unity of effort within organisations.

8   Conclusions

The research work conducted by the CRP has shown that organisational adaptability depends on the creation of unity of effort, which reduces the disparities among crisis management measures implemented within different departments. The crisis cell decides on the measures to be applied within the organisation and makes trade-offs among the different departments regarding the allocation of resources and assignment of roles and responsibilities. It acts as a coordinator and crisis management leader. It is responsible for creating and maintaining unity of effort within the organisation.

In this article, we propose certain organisational factors that are intended to support unity of effort; the implementation of these factors is a responsibility shared throughout the organisation. The proposed factors concern the application of mechanisms for consensus building and situational awareness, strategic planning of the assignment of roles and responsibilities, and operational planning of resource allocation. Since chronic stress-type disruptions are long-lasting and ever-changing, organisations must ensure that unity of effort can be maintained over time. To do this, we suggest assessing sense of coherence, which makes it possible to investigate managers' representation of that coherence between the decisions made by the crisis cell and their OMRs. Sense of coherence makes it possible to quickly diagnose different organisational factors in order to guide the crisis cell regarding more detailed analyses that should be done within the organisation and changes in crisis management.

This research work was done using the action research approach. To complete the four phases of this research approach, it would be interesting to carry out the validation phase within some test organisations; this would make it possible to ensure that our

industrial partners understand the proposed factors and can integrate them into existing management processes. It would also enable us to verify that the information an organisation can collect using sense of coherence enables it to make decisions and change its management practices. In addition, given that the disruptions caused by COVID-19 still exist, this validation phase would allow us to do additional iterations in developing factors and ensure that these factors remain relevant as the situation changes.

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