
Editorial: Optimistic pessimism – pondering on the state of things in crisis management and sustainability

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Biographical notes: William ‘Rick’ Crandall serves as Professor of Management at the University of North Carolina at Pembroke. He earned his PhD in Business Administration from the University of Memphis. His primary research interest is in the area of crisis management, helping organisations cope with catastrophic events. He is author of the book, *Crisis Management in the New Strategy Landscape* (co-authored with John Parnell and John Spillan, also of the University of North Carolina at Pembroke) through Sage Publications. Prior to entering academe, he worked in management for ARA Services (now ARAMARK), a service management firm based in Philadelphia.

For years I have grappled with my outlook on life, like I am sure most of you have too. I know I am suppose to be positive in front of my colleagues and peers, you know, that role model thing. But one step out the front door and I am immediately pessimistic about a few things. We use to be simple about this and just ask, “Well tell me Mr. Crandall, is the glass half empty, or half full?” Of course, we all know the pessimist takes the first view while the optimist takes the latter view. However, my thinking is this – “the glass is a bit dirty, and I asked for juice, not water!” Given that, I guess I am a realist, or in philosophical speak – an optimistic pessimist.

My years of studying crisis events make me optimistic that much has been accomplished in this growing field of management. I do believe that high impact, low probability events will continue to abound in organisational history. However, a wealth of literature is growing in both the practitioner and research fields that indicates that those who want to learn more about this emerging area, crisis management, have the means available to do so. To all of you authors out there who have written articles and books on this topic, I am feeling good about you right now, a bit warm and fuzzy, maybe even a bit optimistic.

Certainly, there is a great deal of enthusiasm for the ‘green movement’ and its close cousin, sustainability. Hardly, an academic meeting goes by without some reference to these topics. In August 2009, the Academy of Management held its annual meeting in Chicago, with the conference theme – ‘Green management matters’. I do feel optimistic about the future of sustainability as there is a great deal of momentum in the private, public, academic, and practitioner sectors.

But examining the interface of crisis management with sustainability is a much different prospect. For one, how do we even look at how these two areas intersect? In the inaugural issue of this journal, my colleague Cliff Mensah and I grappled with this

question in our article – “Crisis management and sustainable development: A framework and proposed research agenda” (Crandall and Mensah, 2008) We proposed a way of looking at these two areas, as well as a list of potential research areas that need to be addressed. Our work was meant to be a starting point, a basis for future learning and collaboration.

In this special issue, we attempt to extend our discussion on sustainability, with its somewhat fleeting relationship with crisis management. *Timothy Coombs* begins our discussion by addressing the problem of external stakeholders who direct their anger toward the organisation because of a sustainability issue. Such a crisis can prompt the organisation to change its policies to a more earth friendly posture, or if ignored by organisational managers, invite the further disdain of stakeholders. As Professor Coombs points out, the use of the internet via blogs, websites, and other forms of social media can make these challenges even more numerous and visible. In our second article, I team up with my colleague John Spillan to discuss emerging trends in the area of crisis management. Next, *Maria Nathan* reminds us that any discussion on sustainability goals must be part of an organisation’s strategic planning process. Her article extends the work of Jeremy Galbreath who presented a framework on strategy and sustainability in an earlier issue of this journal (Galbreath, 2009). On a similar note, John Parnell, John Spillan, and Don Lester expound on the need to promote careful strategy planning within the context of emerging economies citing Chili and Poland as examples.

Sonia Taneja, Mildred Golden Pryor, and Zhang Long take this strategic planning discussion a step further and incorporate crisis forecasting and management into the strategic planning process. With this background, *David Allwright and Harrie Vredenburg* provide a thorough review of the rationale of operating international joint ventures (IJVs), then provide two case examples of failed projects. Both examples involve extraction industries that encountered problems with issues related to sustainability. Finally, *Bruno Tiberghien and Christophe Alaux* addresses a realm they call ‘inherently dangerous territories’. These places have some type of geographical dysfunction which makes them dangerous for human habitation, and yet, local citizens and visitors must continue to live in these areas. After describing four cases of inherently dangerous territories, the authors propose a framework for examining the interventions to address the dysfunctions present. As you study these articles in this special issue, you will see how they fit well together, building on each other by further describing this uncomfortable intersection between crises and sustainability.

At this juncture, I must say that I am ‘optimistically pessimistic’ about these two worlds. Why the pessimism? I do wish at times there were more pleasant things to discuss than the limited resources we face in this world (the need for sustainability) and the unfortunate events that occur to organisations (crises). And yet, it is the reality of organisational life, one that has not really changed for thousands of years. We have always had resource shortages, we have always had crises. In essence, these two issues have been at the heart of leadership problems since the beginning of organisational life.

However, I am optimistic at this juncture as well. Beneath the activism that is directed toward companies that waste resources, behind the media who diligently seek to bring another corporate executive out into the limelight for closer examination after a crisis event, beyond the call for government regulations that so many citizens cry out for when they just do not know what else to say, beyond all these things – we still care – and that helps me stay positive. We have a long way to go in the area of sustainability; in fact the task seems overwhelming at times. We still have a lot to learn on managing crises, those

dysfunctional events that never seem to go away completely, like that lingering bout of winter depression. However, the work is getting done, albeit slowly.

One area where I am forever optimistic is the diligent work of the reviewers who contributed their time and expertise to this special issue. To Don Lester, Mike Menefee, Richard Crandall, Dominic Elliott, Jack Spillan, John Parnell, Maria Nathan, Cliff Mensah, Zaiyong Tang, and Chris Ziemnowicz, I am grateful and appreciative for your commitment to making a new chunk of knowledge available to this larger world we call the academy.

To this end, I remain forever optimistic – with pessimistic tendencies of course.

References

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