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Behaviour in a crisis: they are human and feel fear

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If critical situations are unpredictable by nature, as treaties indicate, people's reactions to them are no less so and, depending on how they react, they may aggravate the problem in question or help to solve it. The purpose of this article is to reflect on the inner drive that leads people within an organisation to make certain decisions, or not make them, and put forward a few ideas for minimising the risks caused by the "human factor" in crisis management.

Three elements that play a decisive role in human reactions to danger are uncertainty, immediacy of risk and notion of how it might affect us personally.

A rapid search among scientific publications on human reactions to danger, mainly in the fields of psychology and neurology, gives us some general ideas that are very useful for explaining what makes people behave in one way or another when faced with critical situations. I read, for example, that the human brain, accustomed to classifying reality into black and white, is poorly equipped to deal with uncertainty, which is why it reacts with alarm in the face of extraordinary contingencies but "relaxes" in respect of risks it controls. One example of this is given by the World Health Organisation, recalling that "seasonal influenza is the perfect paradigm of a technically serious risk which is not culturally serious: it is the type of risk which can kill people, but does not worry them". In contrast, influenza A (H1N1), which affected a very small percentage of people compared with any seasonal influenza, "terrified" governments and citizens.

Apart from the element of uncertainty, reactions can also be affected by the perception of immediacy. Human beings alter their behaviour depending on whether a threat is considered to be near or distant, meaning not only close in space or time, but also emotionally: to what extent is the risk too much for me and how much will it affect my own existence. Sigmund Freud coined the term Realangst to define the anguish caused by an external hazard which is a real threat for an individual.

We shall now apply these general considerations to the specific case of crisis management, based on an initial axiom: the positive or negative evolution of a crisis situation is directly related with the decisions made, from the beginning to the end of the crisis.

A study of different crises having extensive repercussions in public opinion shows that in many cases the problem is worsened to an extent of becoming almost unmanageable by an incorrect initial response by those responsible for handling it. There are often accusations of late reactions, triggering of alerts after what can be considered a reasonable time, delay in notifying authorities or failure

to inform those affected when the situation was first discovered. What leads an organisation to make mistakes of this nature? Quite simply, the attitudes of its members on perceiving a danger.

From observing individual behaviour in crisis situations, we can draw up a classification of negative attitudes in those responsible for handling the problem when it first appears:

"The positive or negative evolution of a crisis situation is directly related with the decisions made, from the beginning to the end of the crisis"

ATTITUDE	PROFILES	CONSEQUENCES
Confident	The person perceives a distant risk which does not threaten his personal security and minimizes the problem, seeking a solution individually and thinking more about how his initiative will be valued by management than their possible effects on third parties.	The information does not reach other people responsible, or reaches them late. Actions usually do not follow standard procedure. Generates collateral damage owing to the lack of empathy with those affected. Worsening of the problem.
Doubtful	The person is not able to put the risk into context or assess how serious it could be. Having doubts as to what to do, he reacts according to past experience, which gives him security, taking the problem out of context, or takes a passive stand: "its better not to do anything than to get it wrong".	The information flows slowly through the filter of the person who should sound the alarm. Damage is minimized. Information is concealed: possible faults / negligence are covered up, which makes it impossible to deal adequately with the problem.
Bold	The person faces the problem squarely without counting on the rest of the organisation. He makes decisions based on his own criteria. He believes in short-term solutions and does not contemplate a long-term strategy.	Information is distorted, adapted to the vision of the "bold" person, who may exaggerate or play down the problem according to his own criteria. Although actions may conform to procedures, they are taken without consensus. The lack of rigour aggravates the risk and complicates its solution.
Fearful	The person hides and does not face up to the problem. He tends to conceal it or twist it. He thinks more about the consequences for himself or the organisation (upsetting management, request for responsibilities/liabilities...) than the effects of the problem.	The information does not reach those responsible in due time and form. There may be serious delays which worsen the problem. Errors or negligence are concealed. Action is insufficient at the beginning: certain measures are neglected through fear that they may alert the rest of the organisation.
Hiperbolical	The person tends to exaggerate what has happened, either out of a desire to take the limelight or because he cannot handle his uncertainty. The alert given is out of proportion and requires the general mobilisation of the organisation.	The information flows rapidly, sometimes excessively, but it is not accurate. This causes unjustified mobilisation of the organisation's resources. It creates a sensation of alarm internally and externally. There is a risk of overacting in the crisis.
Corporative	The person puts the organisation's interests above any others, including those of the persons affected. He acts to protect the business. He justifies what has happened and dodges the issue, focusing the problem outside his area of responsibility or externally.	The information is distorted, adjusted to defence of the organisation. The reality of the facts is altered to adapt it to own interests. Lack of transparency. Concealment.

(The study "La conducta humana ante situaciones de emergencia: análisis de proceso en la conducta individual" ["Human behaviour in emergency situations: process analysis in individual conduct"] made by Instituto Nacional de Seguridad e Higiene en el Trabajo [National Institute of Safety and Hygiene at Work] indicates that "if we describe the most widespread reactions, we could say that during the period of impact, 10-25% of people stick together and keep calm, study an action plan and possibilities; 75% are uncertain and disorganised, uncertain as to what to do, and 10-25% become confused, anxious, blocked, shout hysterically and panic).

The existence of a real "crisis culture" in organisations will help to mitigate many of the adverse effects that may be caused by the reactions described above. "Crisis culture" means that management and employees are aware of the risks associated with their activities and the consequences that poor handling of problems may have on their business and reputation. Accordingly, they deal with all problems as though they were their own, respect protocols and put the common interests of the organisation above their own private interests.

To minimise the fear factor, it is also necessary to minimise the areas of uncertainty. The Freudian Realangst is fought by putting the individual in a situation of certainty and security that will enable him to react promptly and effectively to the risk. Translated to crisis management, this means providing people within the organisation with clear, accessible protocols that respond to the different scenarios that may arise. But although important, in many cases crisis manuals still leave too much open to subjectivity and personal value judgments and/or decisions. The aim should be to provide the organisation with a manual and accessory tools which:

- Pinpoint the factors that could most damage the company's reputation or business.

- Establish homogenous criteria for diagnosing the problem and possible worsening thereof, according to the different situations that may arise during a crisis: existing level of public information, intervention or otherwise of third parties, existence of damage or victims, consequent legal or regulatory implications, etc.

- Set adequate levels of action for each problem: who is mobilised and how; what resources are available; who is to be informed second ...

- Send alerts to those responsible within the organisation automatically, immediately, swiftly and efficiently.

In conclusion, keeping negative attitudes in check in a crisis is essential to prevent additional damage to those generated per se by the problem identified. Behind each late warning, each incorrect or false information, each evasion of responsibilities, there is a person who is fearful of the threat and gears his decision towards reducing the risks directly affecting his position, his employment or his reputation within the organisation. Fear, once again.

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