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Infusing creativity into crisis management: An essential approach today

Christine M. Pearson, S. Amy Sommer

No organization is immune to crises. From the global financial debacle, record-setting bankruptcies and hostile takeovers, to H1N1 and the international reach of contaminated milk, crises challenge leaders in extraordinary ways.

If you have ever been involved in an organizational crisis, you know first-hand that resolution requires creative thinking. If you have managed crises, you have probably experienced a sense of confusion or seizing up just when open, creative thinking and action are needed most. By definition, crisis conditions present unforeseen or unmet challenges that can only be addressed by innovative responses. Tried and trusted methods fall short when a crisis hits, whether the pressing situations involve product defects, environmental contamination, consumer injury, threats to brand integrity or some other calamity.

Crises have always been a part of business, but changes in the work environment today are raising the bar when it comes to crisis management. Coping within the bounds of economic recession can limit an organization's abilities to muster essential resources when crisis strikes. Doing business in a global marketplace can cause organizations to be ill-equipped to communicate and work with colleagues in other cultures whose styles, preferences and values may differ greatly from those at headquarters. These differences surface dramatically when responses must be fast and accurate, as during crisis. Add to these complexities instantaneous visibility worldwide and you have a sense of the situation faced by organizational leaders who struggle to make decisions and take actions with far less private time and far wider public view.

We have worked with organizational leaders, followers and crisis management teams to observe and measure what works and what does not when a crisis looms. In this article, we will remind readers about the nature of organizational crises and crisis management. We will explain what crisis management teams do and why they are essential resources for crisis detection, preparation and containment. We will describe the benefits of crisis scenarios, a tool frequently used by crisis management teams to ready themselves for crises. Most important, we will provide practical guidelines for developing and diffusing creative thinking in a crisis context that are based on our most recent research results.

We base our thoughts on two decades spent examining organizational crises and crisis management programs. Our goal is to illuminate the advantages of crisis management. We focus especially on why it is more important than ever that today's leaders infuse creative thinking into their organizations' crisis planning and response.

WHAT DO WE MEAN BY "CRISES"?

Crises are events or trends that threaten the viability of the organizations within which they occur. By definition, crises are extraordinary events with great potential to do harm. Generally, these low-probability, high-impact occurrences affect not only those within an organization (e.g., executives, employees, work teams), but also stakeholders at arm's reach (e.g., suppliers, customers, employees' families) and beyond (e.g., local communities, advocacy groups, media).

Organizational crises can seem to strike and disappear instantaneously, like a bolt of lightning, or they can build momentum and effect slowly, like a glacier. Airplane hijackings like the attempts made in 2008 on a Turkish Airlines plane (bound from southern Turkey to St. Petersburg, Russia) and in 2009 on Canadian Airlines Flight 918 (bound from Halifax, Nova Scotia to Kingston, Jamaica) may flash in and out of the news within hours. Or, new episodes to old stories, such as the radiation leak of November 2009 at Three Mile Island or the protest marches of December 3, 2009 commemorating the 25th anniversary of the Union Carbide plant contamination at Bhopal, India, can breathe life into ghosts of crises past, reviving them right back into today's headlines.

Types of organizational crises can vary from labor strikes to chemical spills, executive kidnapping, unlawful discrimi-

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nation, shortages of vaccines for those most susceptible to the H1N1 virus, terrorism and the like. In our fast-paced, information-rich times, popular versions today include greed run amok (e.g., like that at Citigroup, Merrill Lynch, Wachovia, Union Bank, Bear Stearns, to name but a few who have recently harmed so many), big business bankruptcy (e.g., of auto giants General Motors (GM) and Chrysler, as well as notables Nortel Networks, Lehman Brothers and the Tribune Company), insider trading (e.g., recent cases touching blue chip tech firms such as IBM, Intel, Atheros and AMD) and marketing spins gone wild (e.g., like that of drug manufacturer Pfizer, whose $2.3 billion fine in 2009 for illegal marketing of its painkiller Bextra set the record as the largest criminal fine in US history).

Organizational crises may take time-tested forms. As long as there have been disgruntled workers, there have been attempts at sabotage. Recent newsworthy examples include sabotage via timed explosive devices that disrupted Russian railway lines in 2008 and again in 2009. Organizational crises can strike in other traditional forms, like the violation of safety standards. A dramatic recent example (including empty fire extinguishers) led to the deaths of factory workers in German steelmaker ThyssenKrupp's plant in Turin, Italy in 2007 and the subsequent indictments (on charges ranging from murder to manslaughter) of six of ThyssenKrupp's top executives in 2008.

Root sources of crises can be mundane, like poor housekeeping, which allegedly caused a severe dust fire at Imperial Sugar Company's facility a few miles west of Savannah, Georgia. Here, the deaths of 14 workers and injuries of another 36 employees in February 2008 were foreshadowed by written warnings of explosive dust hazards that dated back to the 1960s. Tragically, the warnings had gone unheeded for four decades.

Root sources of crises can also be exotic. The most bizarre we have heard recently is that of the "Canal Livre" TV personality in Brazil who put his station at risk by commissioning the murders of at least five drug traffickers. His objective? Boosting ratings by being the first on scene to film the action.

Once a crisis has passed, details may linger in public memory. Many individuals retain vivid images of legendary crises, such as the explosions of the space shuttles Challenger and Columbia, the coastal contamination and wildlife losses of the Exxon Valdez oil spill, the aerial view of the damaged core at the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant or the flooded remains of New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina. These crises became notorious because of mismanagement. But organizations face crises more often than you might imagine. Numerous crises and near misses smolder in organizations but are often doused internally before capturing public awareness.

HOW DO ORGANIZATIONS MANAGE CRISES BEFORE THEY GAIN VISIBILITY?

To avert crises or to mitigate those that occur, savvy organizational leaders implement crisis management programs that are systematic (i.e., they work in accordance with methods or plans) and systemic (i.e., they relate to the entire organizational system). Through crisis management planning and preparation, organizational leaders do what they can to make timely decisions based on the best facts that they can gather. They develop the skills to do so with clear thinking, despite operating under extraordinary conditions. Effective crisis managers strive to achieve an optimal balance between timeliness and certainty regarding decisions and actions.

In organizations with strong crisis management programs, leaders allocate time and resources to prepare their organizations in advance for unusual adverse situations. In the best organizations, leaders learn from crises and near misses that occur within their industry and beyond. They share lessons learned throughout their organizations to improve planning and preparations for the future.

The Crisis Management Team Approach

Whether organizational leaders are preparing for a potential crisis or containing an actual situation, an effective crisis management team (CMT) is an invaluable resource. Regardless of industry, members of CMTs are drawn primarily from their organization's C-suites, because it is here that individuals have the breadth of strategic vision, as well as the authority to make decisions and allocate resources under extenuating circumstances. Where crisis management is practiced proactively, the CMT is brought together periodically to develop and improve crisis readiness by agreeing how corporate values will guide crisis response, and how resources will be allocated in the event of a crisis.

The best CMTs carefully select the types of crises for which they will prepare. Then, they determine the quality of preparations in place, filling in perceived gaps in detection, planning and preparation. CMTs devote time working together so that they can learn to anticipate the preferred styles of their members and become accustomed to other dynamics within the team. Highly effective CMTs develop shared purpose and mutual accountability for a broad range of crisis situations that could impair their organization. They learn to coordinate task and relational approaches that will help them avert or mitigate actual organizational crises. Often, this competence is built through scenario-based learning.

Crisis Management Tools

One of the most widely used tools for preparing organizations to respond to crises is the text-based scenario. Such scenarios provide opportunities for individuals on the CMT to imagine, discuss and debate how they would deal with specific invented events and contingencies. Based on the strengths and weaknesses of their own, real work environment, scenarios provide a tool through which the CMT can examine uncertainties while exposing and explaining their responses to high-risk, high-impact situations.

Typically, as details of a hypothetical crisis are revealed, participating CMT members share their immediate reactions and coordinate their responses to simulated challenges. Often, they do this under time pressures to more closely approximate the conditions of a crisis. Based on their individual and collective expertise and experiences, they weigh the facts at hand and stipulate applications for their organization. As a team, the CMT members imagine and discuss how they would respond to details disclosed in the scenario.

They learn to recognize decisions and insights that are important, uncertain and urgent. They identify gaps between best-case responses and their organization's actual preparedness. Frequently, after working through problems that they encounter in the text-based scenarios, members take follow-up actions to improve their organization's real crisis management capabilities.

CREATIVITY MEETS CRISIS MANAGEMENT

For decades, crisis management experts have professed that creativity enhances thinking about, planning for and responding to crises. Experts advise leaders to deepen and broaden their understanding of the causes and effects of crises by addressing a portfolio of relevant threats. To achieve effective resolution of crises, scholars and consultants urge leaders to commit to open-minded approaches, such as ferreting out bad news early and nurturing their own skepticism. Such recommendations support creative thinking and action, for example, so that potential warning signals can be recognized and acted upon quickly.

Creativity and Early Warnings

Two recent mass shootings underscore the benefits of responding rapidly to warning signals. Although 13 people were murdered in the recent homicides at Fort Hood, the death toll could have been far worse had warnings not been communicated and acted on quickly. Across the 100,000-acre military base, soldiers and their families were alerted rapidly, repeatedly and effectively via sirens and announcements on the public address system. In a heroic response to an early warning call of "shots fired," Police Sergeant Kimberly Munley, a civilian member of Fort Hood's special reaction team, succeeded in bringing down gunman Husan.

Contrast these timely responses with recently released findings regarding the Virginia Tech shootings of 2007. According to an independent public safety report released by the Virginia governor's office in December 2009, police had discovered the first victims of the Virginia Tech shootings more than two hours before the campus was alerted that a gunman was on the loose. Earlier warnings might have spared some of the 32 lives lost that morning. Instead, crisis management within the campus appears not only chaotic, but also intentionally and tragically delayed. Lockdowns of campus buildings were sporadic, with the earliest reported to be the president's building, which was secured more than half an hour before the rest of the campus was given any warning about the shooter. Additional reports describe details of how administrators who were aware of the situation intentionally withheld information from students and faculty, some of whom may have needlessly lost their lives as a result.

Creative Decision-Making Under Normal Conditions

A few years ago, Teresa Amabile and her colleagues debunked the myth that creativity is heightened by the pressure of working "under the gun." Based on data drawn from 177 employees who were members of 22 project teams, Amabile and colleagues concluded that time pressure did *not* enhance creativity, as many had believed. Instead, they found that time pressure stifled creativity, and that its negative impact on creativity endured even after the time pressure was released. Their advice for achieving creative decisions was straightforward: (1) avoid extreme time pressure, (2) choose one-on-one collaborations, and (3) avoid situations where you must be creative "under the gun."

These recommendations suit normal, day-to-day circumstances, but we were intrigued to learn about crisis situations, where decisions and actions are always time-stressed, where collaborations must stretch beyond one-on-one arrangements and where circumstances are always "under the gun." In short, we wanted to understand how teams could infuse creativity into crisis decision-making.

We found a potential source for guidance in research conducted by Ford and Gioia, who studied how creative decision-making could be fostered in teams that were operating under normal circumstances. Additionally, we drew upon crisis management research (e.g., work by Mitroff, Pearson, Clair and Weick) to determine factors consistently noted as essential for crisis management team success. We identified three practical recommendations for creativity in crisis management teams: (1) foster creative intentions (by prompting efforts to see old problems in new ways, by inciting dissatisfaction with the status quo, by nurturing wild ideas as take-off points for creative planning and action); (2) develop enlightened trial and error by familiarizing team members with decision options (by thinking through and discussing previous outcomes, by speculating about options and consequences — intended and otherwise — prior to making any decision, by borrowing ideas from previous decisions or mimicking the effective solutions used by others); and (3) build trust within the team (by communicating openly, by listening carefully and by demonstrating mutual respect). These approaches proved helpful to teams that were attempting to infuse creativity under circumstances of business as usual, but we wanted to know whether the approaches would work under crisis conditions, so we built a crisis management experiment.

Raising the Stakes: A Scenario-Based Experiment for Examining Creativity in Crisis

To explore whether creativity in team-based crisis decision-making could be fostered by creative intentions, familiarity with solutions and intra-team trust, we created and field-tested a multi-phased, three-hour tabletop crisis scenario. We based the text on an actual environmental crisis that had adversely affected a major petrochemical organization and its diverse stakeholders. Working with the advice of actual CMT members of several organizations, we built a rich scenario, incorporating the diverse perspectives of domestic and foreign governments, suppliers, competitors, industrial and professional organizations, environmental activists, consumers and the public.

To test our research questions, we recruited 37 experienced teams of 191 individuals who were enrolled in Executive MBA and MBA programs in the U.S. and Canada. These teams had worked together successfully for a minimum of two months. Individual participants averaged more than seven years of work experience and most were working full-time during the study. The average age of participants was 31; approximately two-thirds were men.

Testing for Creativity During Crisis

Information about the multi-phased scenario was distributed to each team in a series of packets containing photographs, documents, actual quotes from key stakeholders during the crisis, private internal messages, press releases, print and video media reports and additional data. To encourage personal engagement in the simulated crisis study, participants were asked to assume functional roles related to their professional expertise. Teams were instructed to make decisions and take actions as if the besieged company were their own.

The crisis simulation unfolded in four phases, during which participants received vague and specific information, including facts and rumors about their organization and its competitive context, environmental conditions, resource availability and stakeholder reactions. As in actual organizational crises, information was disclosed rapidly, inconsistently and incompletely, and the timing of final decision-making by the teams was extremely limited. Our goal was to simulate information flow during an organizational crisis management experience, despite limited resources and a controlled, experimental environment. After the simulation, data collected from participants confirmed that they experienced time urgency, uncertainty, and situational gravity during the simulation.

When each phase ended, teams were asked to describe precisely the decisions that they would make, the actions that they would take and their rationales for each. Participants, observers and crisis management experts evaluated the team's responses. Creativity, the variable of primary interest here, was evaluated according to two criteria that are commonly used to define a creative outcome: *novelty* (the extent to which the decision or action was unusual, unconventional, uncommon or unique as compared to previous decisions) and *value* (the extent to which the decision or action reflected acceptable or effective choices for solving the problem).

What Worked? How Did the Teams Infuse Creativity?

In each phase of the study, we collected survey responses from individual team members. They evaluated how their team was performing, especially regarding the novelty and value of their approaches. During the simulation, we also made note of our observations of the teams, including their decision-making approaches. After the simulation ended, we conducted interviews with team members.

The composite results confirmed the following outcomes:

- When CMTs set out to be innovative or creative, they actually achieved novel decisions, but the decisions were not necessarily valuable.
- When CMTs were familiar with possible solutions, their decisions were more creative.
- When CMTs had high intra-team trust, they developed creative decisions.

Despite decades of expert advice about managing crises, there is very limited previous testing that supports the effectiveness of their prescriptions. This exploratory study does just that in providing grounded research findings that go beyond anecdotal evidence to confirm the usefulness of crisis management frameworks. This study also provides preliminary research support for the use of tabletop crisis scenarios as an effective training tool and a controlled means of gathering data pertaining to organizational crises and the management of crises.

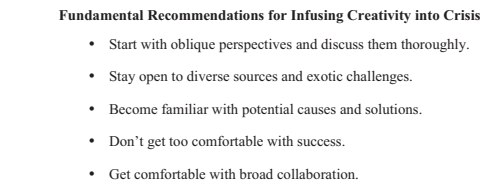


Figure 1 Fundamental Recommendations for Infusing Creativity into Crisis Management.

WHAT'S A LEADER TO DO? GROUNDED ADVICE TO BE CREATIVE IN CRISIS

Practical recommendations (Fig. 1) flow from our findings. Our recommendations are logical, but they are not common organizational practices. To our knowledge, they have not been tested prior to this study. What we have added here is application and testing of how creativity can be infused into teams within the context of organizational crisis.

Start with Oblique Perspectives and Discuss Them Thoroughly

According to the results of our study, the teams that began their preparations and planning with creative intentions were more likely to achieve novel outcomes. More unusual perspectives tended to inspire wilder thoughts that actually fostered practical insights. For example, one effective team in our study described how they thought through numerous potential solutions and ultimately chose an option that was well discussed and thoroughly considered. Their choice proved to be both novel and valuable.

In organizational settings, this approach of recognizing and rewarding the oblique view can help CMT members achieve broader scope when planning for crises. An example drawn from our consulting experience is that of InSurCo (ISC), a national insurance company that challenged its CMT members to envision themselves in the roles of internal assassins. Their assigned objective was to devise creative means of overriding their own organization's information security systems. Armed with years of insider knowledge and experience, ISC's CMT members were able to collectively concoct means of extorting and tampering that became the basis for improved detection and ongoing system improvement. Pushing internal experts to apply their wisdom and experience in very creative ways helped ISC anticipate and curtail sabotage. Eventually, this oblique view helped experts at ISC formulate more sophisticated warning systems for earlier detection of attempted information sabotage by external perpetrators.

Stay Open to Diverse Sources and Exotic Challenges

Another approach to achieving creativity in crisis management is recognizing that early warning signals may originate

from diverse stakeholders whose styles or communication patterns may not match those of appointed crisis management leaders. To leverage creative thinking from the widest array of informants, leaders must be open to diverse perspectives, embracing the possibility of exotic crises through free-flowing discussion and broad-reaching contingency planning. In our scenario-based study, teams that had creative intentions encouraged a brainstorming-like environment. They told us about their repeated attempts to push ideas deeper, while refraining from discounting outlandish suggestions. Teams with little or no creative intentions described difficulties in dealing with unusual possibilities. They said they relied mostly on conventional industry responses.

Any organization is well advised to stay alert to diverse sources and exotic challenges, recognizing that weak links can lead to crises regardless of the geography or nature of their connection to the organization. The recent flow of milk contamination from China may exemplify the explosive nature of industrial crises. Imagine potential deadly reach spreading from a handful of farmers in the northeast Chinese province of Hebei across the globe.

In this well-publicized case, culprit farmers added melamine, an industrial compound used in manufacturing fertilizers, plastics and cleaning products, to diluted milk to mimic desirable protein standards and increase their profits. Their chemically tainted milk disrupted food safety and led to recalls across the European Union, the U.S., India, the United Arab Emirates, Japan, Singapore and beyond. Despite the local nature of the original farm-based tampering, global flagship companies such as Starbucks, Heinz, Unilever and Cadbury were affected, pulling product and deploying specialists internationally to assure the safety of their food product chains. The melamine additive caused the deaths of at least six babies and the illness of many thousands more. Here, the misdeeds of a small group of Chinese farmers led to cover-ups, sanctions, arrests, jail sentences and executions that touched organizations and consumers globally.

Become Familiar with Potential Causes and Solutions

Successful teams in our study did what they could in advance to prepare for the crisis they faced and its multiple phases. To achieve this, they assessed resource access, monitored stakeholders, and devised and calculated the pros and cons of alternative strategies. For example, teams in our study told us that they achieved familiarity with potential causes and solutions by committing to the following approaches:

- Determine a broad array of potential stakeholders as well as their relative importance.
- Make a checklist of important challenges to consider from a strategic standpoint and then prioritize these challenges in decreasing order of importance.
- Create a stakeholder map to detail potential interactions among stakeholders as well as distinguish among their shared and diverse interests.
- Diagram potential impact and repercussions of each alternative approach.

Underlying each of these approaches is the idea that practice can make it easier (1) to recognize and access known solutions, if they exist and (2) to generate new alternatives, when original solutions must be invented.

Even the simple exercise of working through tabletop scenarios can help participants become familiar with crisis and crisis response patterns so that they can recognize and evaluate crises and relevant responses more easily. Fast Food Chain (FFC), a client we worked with in the restaurant industry, was able to avert potential scandal and product recall because members of the CMT at FFC were well informed about the specific timing of symptoms of food-borne illnesses. When an initial consumer complaint was filed via the FFC telephone hotline, details of the call were forwarded immediately to the corporate CMT. Within the team, expert members recognized that the time between food consumption and emergent symptoms was not sufficient for contaminated food to have been the cause of the illness. As a result, the team was able to dispel the complaint and convince the consumer not to pursue unwarranted legal action against the FFC.

A similar situation occurred in Canada in 2009 when a former Maple Leaf Foods employee was charged with inserting sewing needles into Maple Leaf meat products. Corporate leaders were able to avert a recall because they were confident that the tampering had occurred after the product had left the plant. They knew that metal detection was a final step in their food processing chain and that signals would have alerted inspectors to the needles.

Do not Get Too Comfortable with Success

In worst-case scenarios, leadership opportunities to demonstrate creative responses are stifled by habitual thinking and the failure of success. To substantiate this claim, we need look no further than leadership of the global economic crisis. Despite warnings reported for months in business journals and magazines, economic leaders could not be unstuck from their habits.

The reaction of Alan Greenspan, then chairman of the Federal Reserve, to the global crisis provides a startling example. During questioning by Congress, Greenspan admitted that he was shocked to find a flaw in his thinking. After all, he asserted, what he had been doing for more than 40 years had worked exceptionally well. . .well, except for the flaw. Shocked at a flaw that has led to global recession? Even in hindsight, it is difficult to imagine how creative thinking could be so completely annulled at this level.

Consider, too, the excessive confidence that stifled creative thinking by financial sector influential and former U.S. Secretary of the Treasury Robert Rubin, who was also temporarily appointed chairman of Citibank. When asked whether he might have made any mistakes during his tenure as chairman, Rubin admitted that he had thought a lot about it but, despite the losses amassed, he was inclined to think not. Downstream sufferers worldwide still cannot understand how leaders of such renown could miss signals of economic doom. Why did they not look for exceptions? Why did they not permit themselves to think beyond habit? Success seemed to supply the blinders.

Get Comfortable with Broad Collaboration

As CMTs become comfortable with the process of generating solutions, they find that their decisions in novel situations flow more smoothly. Participants in our study told us that they discussed a variety of situations thoroughly and then developed a number of diverse solutions before making a decision choice. One study participant from a team whose responses were evaluated as creative told us that members of his team questioned each other vigorously. They shared information, including their rationales for recommendations and their concerns about potential shortcomings. By contrast, a participant from a team that lacked creative outcomes admitted to relying on standard options.

We have observed CMT members become more willing and able to explore exotic ideas and unusual approaches when they practice crisis management approaches as a team. As they become more comfortable with each other, their anxiety about managing unknown challenges tends to drop and their confidence as a team tends to grow.

Trust lubricates relationships, binds people together and facilitates collaboration. When teammates describe their views, they often uncover common perspectives. Even when working with hypothetical scenarios, if team members listen carefully, defer judgment and build on each other's ideas, trust within the team grows. As trust grows, individuals reinforce the cycle by developing greater willingness to share their own ideas and to stay tuned in to others' suggestions. By avoiding habitual decision-making patterns among CMT members, opportunities for creativity expand and information flows more purely.

As an example of extending team relationships, we have helped build connections between manufacturers and distributors through our consulting practices. When we have brought these stakeholder groups together to work in newly formed collaborative crisis management efforts, we have seen improvements. These enhancements are often achieved via earlier detection and correction of problems, whether by stopping faulty production lines at the first signs of trouble or by issuing focused recalls quickly. The manufacturers and distributors we have worked with have saved time and money by collaborating as a team would, with a shared purpose to curtail problems swiftly and quietly, before they became public crises.

Recent civil penalties leveraged on companies selling toys containing high levels of lead paint are public examples of the high cost of not correcting problems as early as possible in the supply chain. During the summer of 2009, Mattel and its subsidiary Fisher-Price were fined more than $2 million for importing from China toys that contained lead paint. Within months, Target Corporation was fined $600,000 for not pulling lead-painted Chinese-manufactured toys off store shelves quickly enough. According to a senior representative of the U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission, everyone in the supply chain was at fault. Rather than working collaboratively to refuse or withdraw lead-based paint products, stakeholders from manufacturers to importers to retailers wasted precious time pointing fingers rather than collaborating to ferret out and correct the problem.

A FINAL CASE OF SUCCESS: CREATIVITY INFUSED THROUGH PROCEDURAL INNOVATION DURING CODE ORANGE

We close our examples with a recent case of an organization that successfully infused creativity into its decisions and actions under the most dire of circumstances, when lives were at pandemic risk. When a Sudden Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) lockdown threatened patient care in Toronto hospitals, the continuity of medical care was at risk. Routine techniques normally used to address SARS-type illness were not enough. Medical resources were strained and health needs were exploding. Quarantine, a familiar solution to contain this type of threat, was not a viable alternative. The anticipated reach of the disease was too great and the limited number of hospital beds was too small. Instead, physicians and nurses had to work together creatively to develop new ways to deal with the potential SARS pandemic.

As the number of SARS cases in Toronto hospitals quickly increased from 18 to 49, the list of infected hospital workers grew rapidly. Available hospital beds and medical staff were dwindling. Per standard procedures, the hospitals had carefully admitted official SARS cases into isolation rooms, but the lack of resources and the surplus suspected cases prohibited admitting all potential SARS sufferers. Instead, given foreseeable constraints, even suspected cases had to be dismissed. Even in the face of early warnings and despite the probability of contaminating additional individuals, those who might be SARS-infected were released if their condition had not escalated to full-blown SARS after a brief incubation in the hospital.

To address the health crisis of rapidly spreading SARS, combined with the lack of hospital beds, health care teams developed practical new procedures. Potential SARS cases would be isolated at home. Hospital workers caring for SARS victims would limit their contact with their own family members. To reduce the chance of transmitting the disease, those who cared for SARS patients would travel to and from work alone. While at work, they would be isolated from their colleagues. These creative approaches were effective. Within days of putting the new approaches into effect, the Toronto hospitals were cleared of the SARS threat and removed from the World Health Organization advisory list.

CONCLUSION

The need to infuse creativity into organizational crisis management may be more essential now than ever. Although research regarding creativity suggests that time pressure stifles innovation, we have explored how to foster creativity when time pressure cannot be avoided, when uncertainty is high and when crises loom. From our qualitative and quantitative data, we have extracted practical lessons to help organizations rise to the challenges of today's business environment.


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Christine Pearson is a professor of global management at Thunderbird. Her most recent book (with C. Porath), *The Cost of Bad Behavior: How Incivility is Damaging Your Business and What to Do About It*, makes a business case for workplace civility, exploring the causes and outcomes of incivility as well as strategies for resolving minor situations before they spiral into something major. An expert on dysfunctional workplace behavior, Pearson has also developed insights and solutions regarding problems that escalate from incivility and aggression in the workplace. Her additional stream of research focuses on the strategies and benefits of organizational crisis management (Thunderbird School of Global Management, 15249 N 59th Avenue, Glendale, AZ 85309-6000, United States. Tel.: +1 602 978 7276; fax: +1 480 315 1033; email: pearsonc@t-bird.edu).

Amy Sommer is a post-doctoral Fellow at Harvard University. Her research focuses on leader and team effectiveness, especially during difficult situations and organizational crises. Specifically, she investigates four areas: (a) health care, (b) team dynamics and coaching, (c) decision-making, and (d) creativity. Sommer examines multiple levels of analysis and use various research methods in both laboratory and field settings (Harvard University, 33 Kirkland Street, Cambridge, MA 02138, United States. Tel.: +1 617 999 7520; fax: +1 617 495 3728; email: ssommer@fas.harvard.edu).