

Challenges and Strategies in a Crisis: A Case Study of a Private Educational Institute in Karachi

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of the study was to collect a comprehensive list of leadership challenges faced and strategies utilized during a campus crisis. The crises associated with educational institutions after various involvements by the university section heads and the strategies used in the light of Bolman and Deal's multi frame to combat these issues were identified. Head of departments from a private educational institute were interviewed about their experiences regarding crisis management and what strategies they had implemented. The participants discussed how leadership shown at their respective level and how it contributed to the overall mission and vision of the institution. The study is focused on reframing the campus leaders on structural, human resources, political and symbolic leadership. The researcher found the main challenge faced by the leaders was the inability to integrate the frames of leadership, which in- turn lead to ineffective strategies of handling crises faced by the educational institution. Like all organizations, an educational institute is not void of problems and requires proper crisis management team. Six major challenges were identified for campus leaders during crisis: (a) Streamline of the policies b) Right personnel on the team c) Physical infrastructure and facilities d) Frequent and regular training and development of the personnel e) Right people to report to f) Open communication and clear guidelines in the form of well established/updated manual. Study findings suggested that it is not the type of crisis but the amount of devastation caused by the leadership when challenges are not dealt appropriately. Some leaders were found relying on structure heavily and ignored other frames. Others followed the human resources role where the leader believed in people and communicated their belief and empowered others, at times ignoring their own growth and collaboration. The political role created cynicism and mistrust. Political leaders were too work oriented and were misunderstood to be amoral, scheming and unconcerned. Findings from this study provided not only an overview of leadership challenges and strategies during campus crisis, but insight into a variety of crisis types, and practical application strategies for higher educational administrators.

1. INTRODUCTION

We live in a world marred by unprecedented turmoil, and companies and organizations are increasingly faced with unpredictable circumstances every day. Similarly, educational organizations, often find themselves in a mire of crisis, especially in a country like Pakistan. A number of challenges are faced by the educational organizations such as financial and economic problems, academic freedom, government freedom and teaching standards. The survival of the educational sector during a prevalent change must be taken seriously. The endurance of this sector during a period of quick and widespread change should not be taken for granted. It is time for educational institutes and universities to think about the continuing concerns of their reaction and contemplate what their inaction would lead to if appropriate preparation is not undertaken. Although education is acknowledged as a major instrument for promoting socio-economic and political development in Pakistan, the concept of crisis management in the education sector is not fully formed.

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study is to identify the issues and strategies related to the educational institutions and the role of leadership to cope with the challenges and developing strategies during the crisis. The research method adopted for this study is qualitative in nature. The qualitative research process allows the researcher to explore multileveled questions and permits the questions to be modified as the data is collected from multiple sources (Corbin and Strauss, 2008; Johnson and Christensen, 2008).

The qualitative research process best suits this study because of the flexibility in probing the participants about their experiences in order to capture the richness of data embedded in the context in which the crisis may occur. Hence semi-structured interviews are used along with, archival records, documents and the participants observation. This method has worked well to understand issues/crises under study, since their very natures are not normally structured. Corbin and Strauss also supported by stating, "Qualitative research begins with a broad question and often no pre identified concepts". Furthermore due to the complexity of the subject, and how the data is blended within the context, the qualitative study through constructive philosophy supports the research design.

2.2 Research Design

The case study design has been used for this study. Yin explains that case studies are “the preferred strategy when, how and, why questions are being posed, when the investigator has little control over events, and when the focus is on a contemporary phenomenon within some real-life context”. This research is based on a single holistic case study of an educational institute where the case itself is of primary interest of exploration. The exploration is driven by the researchers’ interest to understand more about the uniqueness of the research problem and then to build a framework for other cases in a similar context and setting.

2.3 Research Setting

Educational institutes like other organizations in the public and private sector are also susceptible to a crisis. Crises are not unique to any particular program, department or campus. This study focuses on an educational institution in Karachi. It is recognized by the HEC and has a prestigious position among the academic community. Many transformational and transactional changes have taken place during its growth and maturity period; hence the setting is suitable to answer the established research questions.

Since the study focuses on only one institute in Karachi; hence the unit of analysis is the same as the case. Multiple evidences within the institution are collected by using the purposive sampling technique which increased the scope and range and richness of the data that allowed multiple realities to be captured from a single case.

Some relevant portion of the information given in the interview process may have abstract concepts. The participants who have first-hand experience in dealing with crisis situations have provided more insight into the data. Analyzing the data and looking for the implicit meaning is important in the data collection process through printed policies and procedures and participant observation.

The researcher has also acted as a complete participant and developed self-memos to record multiple observations. The people interviewed were classified as senior and middle level managers. To record multiple observations, different sections and departments of the institution were approached to gather diverse and rich data from different conditions thus showing how the data may vary under different conditions. The information is derived from the current phenomenon and allows the researcher to look at numerous aspects at a single point in time by posing the study as cross sectional, not longitudinal.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

(Rollo and Zdziarski, 2007) defines crisis as “a crisis is an event, which is often sudden or unexpected, that disrupts the normal operations of the institution or its educational mission and threatens the well-being of personnel, property, financial resources, and/or reputation of the institution”. There are more than 55 degree awarding private educational institutes in various disciplines in Karachi. The organizational structure of these institutes consists of governing bodies, the academic council, academic quality cell, the academic advisory committees, section heads, head of department, faculty committees, examination cell, academic committee, admission committee, recruitment committee, disciplinary committee, etc. An educational institute like any organization constitutes of operations that are complex and need to be addressed. Organizations cannot prepare for every single crisis it meets up with as this would lead to misuse of financial and human resources however leaders can adequately prepare for most crises. A crisis of certain magnitude can affect an educational institute, both from an educational standpoint as well as an administrative perspective.

3.1 Types of Crises

Researchers have categorized crises into three broad types to understand the concept better:

1. Emergency
2. Technical
3. Disaster

(Gilpin and Murphy, 2008; Jacques, Gatot and Wallemaq, 2007)

Emergency crises are small-scale and localized while disasters are seen as large scale. Technical crises come from human design, error, and failure in technology. Additionally, crises have been separated into natural and human made (Gilpin and Murphy, 2008; Griffin, 2007; Kupperman, Wilcox and Smith, 1975; Lalonde, 2004; Rosenthal and Kouzmin, 1997). Natural crises deal with nature and its impact on people and their surroundings, human made crises occur from human errors, loss of technological control, or are intentional implemented by a person to get ahead or cause harm to others (Rosenthal and Kouzmin, 1997)

Regardless of the organization, the types of a crises may be a myriad of natural disasters, terrorism, workplace violence, disease outbreaks, unforeseeable technical problems, product failure, emergencies, malevolence, confrontations, mismanagement, organizational misdeeds, economic hardship, human accidents, rumors and bad leadership (Coombs, 2007; Gilpin and Murphy, 2008; Klann, 2003; Kupperman, Wilcox and Smith, 1975; Rosenthal and Kouzmin, 1997; Smits and Ezzat, 2003).

Whatever type of crisis the organization is going through, the characteristics are sudden, severe and associated with uncertainty (Ahmed, 2006; Coombs, 2007; Fink, 1986; Lerbinger, 1997; Rosenthal and Kouzmin, 1997).

There is usually no time or very short response time to address the crisis as the crises are always unexpected (Klann, 2003; Rollo and Zdziarski, 2007). All crises deal with disruption of information, knowledge, and understanding, causing trouble for stakeholders (Gilpin and Murphy, 2008) and can be a threat to basic human needs and well-being (Klann, 2003; Mitroff, 2001).

3.2 Crisis in Educational Institutions.

In recent years, college campuses have been exposed to the possibilities of political unrest, security concerns, threats, murders, natural disasters, demonstrations, and riots (Griffin, 2007; Jackson, Terrell and Heard, 2007; Rollo and Zdziarski, 2007). Zdziarski, Rollo, et al (2007) define a campus emergency as "...an event that disrupts the orderly operations of the institutions or its educational mission". In view of the nature of today's complex higher education environment, a crisis can pose a "threat to system stability, questioning of core assumptions and beliefs, and threats to high priority goals, including image, legitimacy, profitability, and even survival" (Seeger, Sellnow and Ulmer, 2003).

During a crisis, there is inadequate, deficient or non-existent human response that affects employee morale, group cohesion, stress levels and attitudes significantly. At the same time, the ability of the institution to see the warning signs and take the initiative to overcome the developing crisis is affected. Concerns regarding instruction standards, the significance of research, the inadequate development of the teachers, the alignment of policies with the higher educational bodies, racism on campus, disciplinary actions, and lack of funding, lack of facilities and their communication are also major challenges educational institutions are faced with.

Campus officials need to take a look at their campus crisis plans and re-evaluate their processes and procedures, because campus safety and smooth operations is an important responsibility of the administration. Campus crises have a significant impact on education, students, their families and the society as a whole. An institution's handling a crisis can impact its stakeholders including students. The institution's reputation and credibility is at stake if the confidence of the community is not regained and maintained during a crisis. The quick thinking of the leader is critical in establishing the institution's place in public esteem, and their place at different levels in an institution may play a significant role in preventing and handling it. The goal of the colleges and universities during a crisis situation should be to restore physical and emotional security quickly, help their constituents psychologically handle the experience, and show the larger community they have properly handled the situation.

3.3 Crisis Management

Crisis management can be difficult for educational institutions as i) crises are infrequent events, ii) many institutions that have faced a crisis do not like to discuss the experience because they do not want others to scrutinize how they handled the situation. This therefore makes it very important for higher education institutions to become more aware of crisis management and to better prepare their crisis management plan (Coombs, 2007; Smits and Ezzat, 2003), in all types of crises.

Crisis management can include managing hazards, disasters, economic issues, and disruptions to the system or organization (Waugh and Streib, 2006), and even operational glitches. Administrators need to continuously assess their strengths and weaknesses to train and develop personnel for different types of crises. Administrators need to be prepared for a crisis before it happens and handle the crisis when it happens.

Crisis management involves a linear three-phase strategy: prevent - respond - recover.

First, a linear model implies that crises are individual and isolated events. Evidence shows that crises are not isolated events in educational institutes, but that they emerge from and impact upon the complexity of the teaching and learning environment and its associated structures and activities. Dealing with educational crisis requires systems thinking that is integrally linked to the educational strategy (Gronn, 2003; Mulford, 2008).

Second, a linear model implies that the occurrence and nature of a crisis which can be anticipated by campus leaders to a certain extent as they are the decision makers and thus standard response procedures are applicable. This does not mean that contingency plans cannot or should not be developed. Rather, it is suggesting that other ways of thinking and leading will be necessary as the nature of crisis is unpredictable.

Third, a linear model suggests that, just as every crisis has a defined start; it also has a defined 'end'. Leaders will have to move on and learn from what has happened so that they are better prepared to respond decisively and effectively in the future. This system will ensure that maximum information for decision-making is available; misinformation is minimized; uncertainty and confusion among stakeholders are limited; and access to support is maximized.

3.4 Crisis Leadership

Leaders are always referred to their knowledge, skills, or abilities facilitate to perform a task (Boyatzis, 1982; Ulrich, Zenger and Smallwood, 1999). The term "leadership is coined overtime where roles evolve overtime in a dynamic process and leaders influence can extend beyond the focal organization's boundaries" (Denis, Lamothe and Langley, 2001).

Whenever an organization is faced with a crisis situation, leaders communicate dynamically, which requires insight and sense-making skills in order for them to determine appropriate courses of action (Walsh, 1995; Weick, 1988)

Crisis leadership requires competencies such as decision making and communication skills, so as to create and identify organizational capabilities, supporting an effective working culture, and developing human capital (Bolman and Deal, 2003) without which the leader will not be successful in dealing with the challenges faced by the organization.

3.5 Theoretical Framework

The Four Frames or “multi-frame” theoretical framework on leadership devised by Lee Bolman and Terrence Deal (2003) is adopted for this study. This “multi-frame” discusses how organization looks at an issue or a problem in multiple ways.

Head of Departments and administrators make many decisions in the crisis management process for many different reasons. This framework will allow an opportunity to examine the decisions these administrators make and identify the differences between management and leadership, and how the different dimensions can be seen in the organizations operations.

Lee Bolman and Terrence Deal’s “multiframe” consists of the structural, human resource, political, and symbolic frame to give an overall impression of an issue or a problem (Bolman and Deal, 2003). According to Bolman & Deal, one or two frames can attract the researcher while others are detested. Some framework would be comprehensible and simple while others may be confusing. By applying all four, increases the understanding of the organization. This four frame network allows the leadership process to travel through the decision making process, allowing for the leaders to make the right decisions.

3.5.1 Structural Frame

The structural frame is basis for the internal organization and their interactions and dealings with the outside stakeholders. The structural frame deals with leadership whose style is analyzing and coordinating work with the roles and responsibilities of the team members. It also focuses on structure, strategy, environment, implementation, experimentation and adaptation.

3.5.2 Human Resource Frame

The human resource frame deals with the personnel in the organization and how their interactions and decisions impact each other (Bolman and Deal, 2003). People play an important role within the organization, and organizations exist to serve the needs of the people. If the people do not fit with the organization, then a problem is often created, while a good fit will usually bring benefits to the organization. The organization needs to invest in hiring, training, maintaining, protecting, and rewarding of the employees (Bolman and Deal, 2003). The human resource frame will be used by administrators to determine how much they invest and empower the employees. It could also be used to determine what members of the organization are chosen to be on the crisis management team.

3.5.3 Political Frame

The political frame is “...the realistic process of making decisions and allocating resources in a context of scarcity and divergent interests” (Bolman and Deal, 2003). This frame deals with the use of power, conflicts between people, and the coalitions that are built within the organization. Organizations, such as those found in higher education, are made up of many different people with many different ideas, values, and beliefs and the members will bring this into the operations.

Politics plays a large part in the decisions which are made by administrators in an organization. The power given to individuals and the power an organization has with the stakeholders can be a major influence in a time of crisis. Administrators may use the political frame to determine how people will interact and respond to the crisis. The decisions made can be heavily influenced by the political frame.

3.5.4 Symbolic Frame

The symbolic frame is when leaders inspire, view organizations as a stage or theatre to play certain roles and give impressions. These leaders use symbols to capture attention and try to frame experience and discover and communicate a vision. The symbolic frame represents the principles, rituals, and ceremonies of the organization (Bolman and Deal, 2003). Higher education institutions often are influenced by the symbolic frames and the decisions are impacted by this. The symbolic frame can be a guiding force in how higher education administrators make decisions in a time of crisis.

4. DATA ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

Multiple tools are used to collect the primary and secondary data. The data is collected by interviews, documents, archival records and participants’ observations’. Different heads of department of the institution were interviewed to gain their personal insight into the crisis management process and about the necessary leadership experiences to handle crisis situations. These interviews were conducted individually over a period of two months.

The participants were contacted to schedule dates and times for the interviews. Each participant was briefed before recording on the purpose and scope of the interview. They were also given a copy of the consent form to look over in case they had additional questions. Some of the interviews took place in the researcher’s office

while the others took place in the participant's office. Each participant was explained the process and purpose of the interview and all interviewees had voluntarily agreed upon to participate. Each interview was digitally recorded with the participant's knowledge and consent. The questions were broad and open ended, in order to gather as much information as possible without guiding the interviewee in any particular direction. A protocol of interview questions was created beforehand to submit to the participant. The shortest interview lasted approximately 45 minutes while the longest interview lasted an hour and a half. Each participant was told that their names would be confidential; they would get a chance to review and add additional information to the interview; and that at any point of time they could decide not to be a participant in the study.

Additional information was observed in order to triangulate the information given by the interviewees. Triangulation allows the researcher as a participant observer to check the integrity of the data using multiple data sources or methods (Schwandt, 2001). Triangulation occurred by comparing different statements given by the participants with each other and by also looking at printed policies and procedures. Data was analysed as soon after the interview was conducted in order to develop the research questions and elaborate on ideas with future interviewees. (Corbin and Strauss, 2008) This helped the process to move forward. After the completion of the interview, the interview was transcribed verbatim. Therefore, the interview process and data analysis was being conducted simultaneously. The transcribed interviews went through the coding process. The data was open coded looking for key reoccurring concepts and themes. The data was used to answer research questions. The data collected from the interviews was compared with the available literature on the subject to authenticate the findings.

Following open coding, the data was broken down into hierarchical categories in order to determine the important themes from the interviews. Once the major themes were determined, minor themes were formed within each major theme. After all of the textual data had been analyzed, the data was divided into hierarchal categories. Indirect quotes were used from the participants when possible to highlight the importance and similarities in the findings of the data. A comparison was developed through primary data and literature on crisis management stating Bolman and Deal's four frames as the theoretical framework was used to guide the process.

4.1 Ethical Issues

The interviews consisted of some individuals who were associates and had a previous working relationship. Every effort was made to disassociate the personal experience with them and the events from the interviews. All interviews were taken with the consent of the participants and when some of the participants had requested to withdraw, it was done amicably. The anonymity and confidentiality was observed throughout the process.

Table 1: Findings of Leadership Challenges and Strategies in a Crisis.

Classification	Nature	Issues & challenges	Strategies
Short Term	-Sudden in arrival and swift in conclusion	Disruptions in day to day academic activities Changes at operational activities, events, or personnel	Structural Strategy: Quick responses Standard Procedures (SOP)
Cathartic	Slow in build-up, reach a critical point then swiftly solved	Faculty and staff turn over Employee conflicts during transactional changes Demotivation leading to loss of vision and mission of institution. Loss of ownership of institution	Political Strategy: Task oriented approach Tactical level staff training and Changes in organizational policy according the need
Long term	Develop slowly and bubble along for a very long time without any clear resolution.	Challenge to diagnose the problems and symptoms Digressing from mission and vision Financial losses Pressure on infra-structure and facilities	Political Strategy: Mobilizing the higher level employees for achieving vision and mission. Strategy and financial decisions Leadership trainings of all departmental leaders
One of One	Quite unique and would not be expected to reoccur	Failures of program Crashing of IT systems Security threats Natural Disasters	Human Resource strategy: H specialized human resource training People oriented approach Disaster recovery planning
Infectious	Crisis that occurs, resolves quickly but leaves behind significant other issues	Poor academic planning Hiring of inexperience people at key positions Impulsive decision making in financial matters	Symbolic Resource Strategy: Decisions and policy on the basis of the positions Participative decision making through process

All evidences have been collected through in-depth interviews, archival records, documents and participant observation.

5. CONCLUSION

The case study explored different types of issues and challenges faced by leaders at different levels in a higher education institution. The challenges were classified into different categories, based on Bolman and Deal's model. From this classification, it has emerged that like all other organizations, crises in educational institutions are associated with people, processes and role of leaders in handling these crisis.

Following key points were deduced from the study:

- Issues and challenges faced by different leaders in the institute were classified into categories according to the Bolman and Deal model.
- Leaders were mostly following the linear phase strategy of crisis management which included the prevent/respond/recover strategy while others were subjected to the frames.
- Some leaders were found relying on structure heavily and ignored other frames.
- Others followed the human resources role where the leader believed in people and communicated their belief and empowered others, at times ignoring their own growth and collaboration.

The political role created cynicism and mistrust. Political leaders were too work oriented and were misunderstood to be amoral, scheming and unconcerned.

5.1 Recommendations

Rules to encounter the issues of the organizational dynamics that lead to crises should be available in a proper document with all departments. Having an effective, efficient and an experienced designated group of people to facilitate process specifically designed to inform employees of their benefits and duties could reduce ambiguities and increase motivation. Guidelines should be established regarding the role of the leader and in this regard human resource departments need to look at fiscal compensation for long term crisis situations where leaders deal with them effectively.

A formal crisis audit and manual can be good start by individual departments for speculated problems and issues that may arise. They need to form a bond with their fellow team members and across other departments to function well. When the institution invests in training and building a functioning team, it shows a commitment to the operations. A due authority delegation would help to channelize the normal operations. Finally, the team leader, heads of academic and administrative departments serve as the key person with a major role and a lot of responsibility. Many critical decisions are dependent on them and the team members look up to their leader for guidance. The leaders need to have the ability to make quick decisions during stressful situations, with an ethic of care and should be able to integrate strategy as and when required, instead of functioning in one particular role.

5.2 Areas of Further Research

The study conducted by using a single case can be extended by considering more cases in the similar context, which can provide rich cross case synthesis. Also this study can be further strengthened by considering the temporal changes in one or more such crises to establish the time series effect and logical flow of events. Further extensions are possible by taking a similar context and other tools of data collection.

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