
Organizing in Times of Crisis: The case of COVID-19

Organizing in and for the Unexpected

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What to Expect

- ❑ Guidung question: How can organizations be designed to routinely deal with the Unexpected?

- ❑ Learn about:
 - Crisis unfold in different phases

 - Managing the tension between stability and flexibility in responding to unexpected events

 - The role of routines, improvisation, and roles in managing the Unexpected

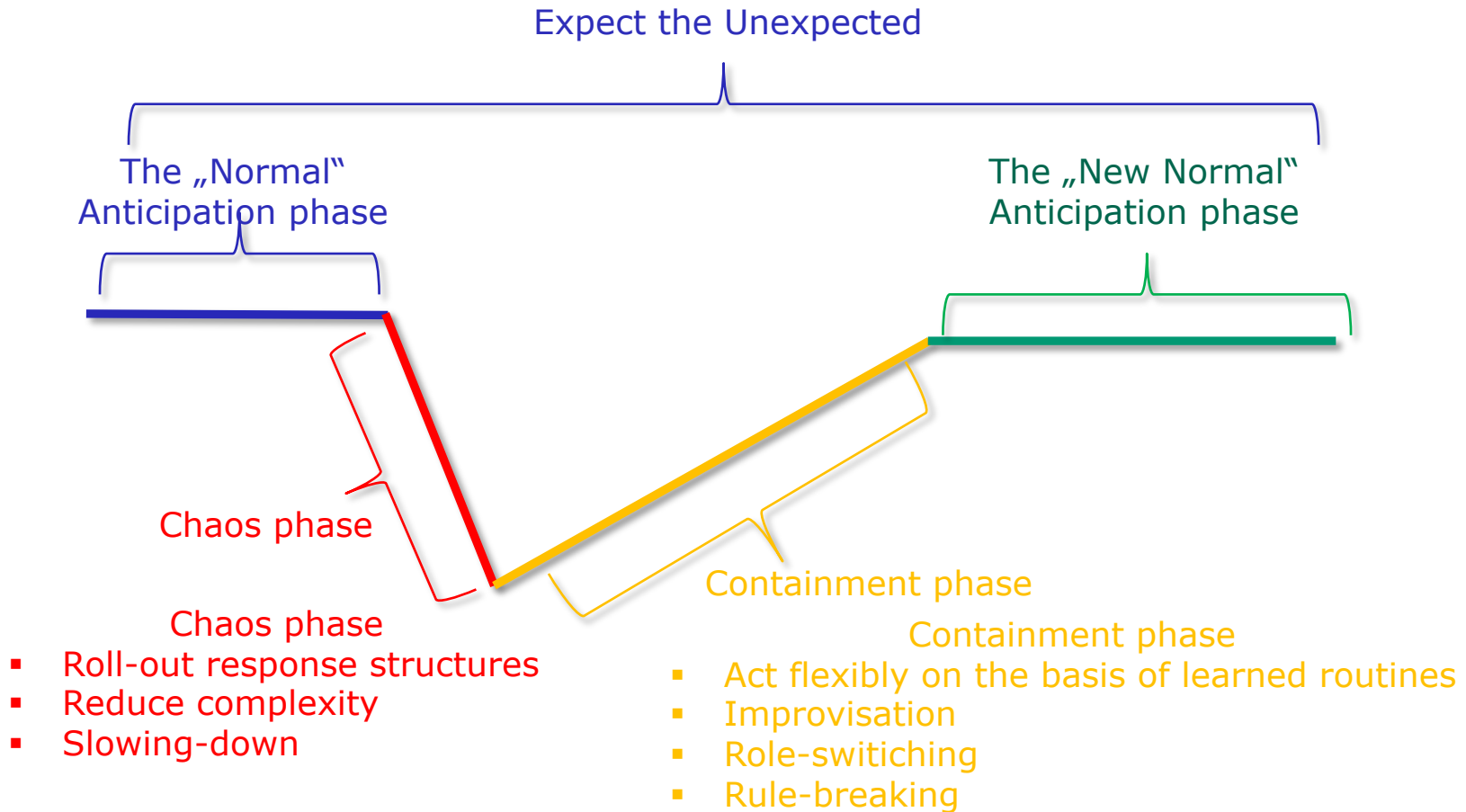
 - Rules and Rule-breaking in addressing unexpected events

From Crisis prevention to Managing the Unexpected

- ❑ Traditional understanding: Crisis prevention
 - Unexpected events need to be avoided at all costs
 - Better planning, more information, sophisticated forecasting are key
 - Internal operations: reliable routines and procedures
 - External: better environmental scanning, more insights
 - Unexpected: lack of knowledge, planning failure

- ❑ New paradigm: Expecting the Unexpected
 - Unexpected events cannot be avoided: environment and organization are complex (normal accident theory)
 - Reversing the question: instead of: how the Unexpected be avoided, how can we manage the Unexpected
 - Grand Challenges: problems are complex, uncertain, evaluative (Ferraro et al. 2015)

Crisis unfold in phases (adapted from Darkow 2019)



Chaos Phase (adapted from Danner-Schröder/Geiger 2016)

- ❑ Establishing structures
 - Fast prioritizing on the basis of routines (e.g. triage)
 - Focus: avoid destructions, active „overseeing“
 - Reduce complexity: first get ready to act before acting
 - Non-acting as a key „action“

**„each catastrophe is different, but we always approach it in similar ways“
(first responder THW)**



**Keep routines on track as key focus
Reduce complexity**

Containment Phase (adapted from Bechky/Okhuysen 2011 & Danner-Schröder/Geiger 2016)

- ❑ Act flexible on the basis of learnt routines
 - Disentangle existing routines into discrete chunks
 - Flexible re-combination of these chunks to adapt to varying circumstances

- ❑ Improvisation as key capability
 - Use whatever tools at hand (bricolage)
 - Variety of skill-sets needed

- ❑ Swift switching of roles
 - Response teams switch roles as situation demands
 - Swift switch between different tasks

Containment Phase (adapted from Bechky/Okhuysen 2011)

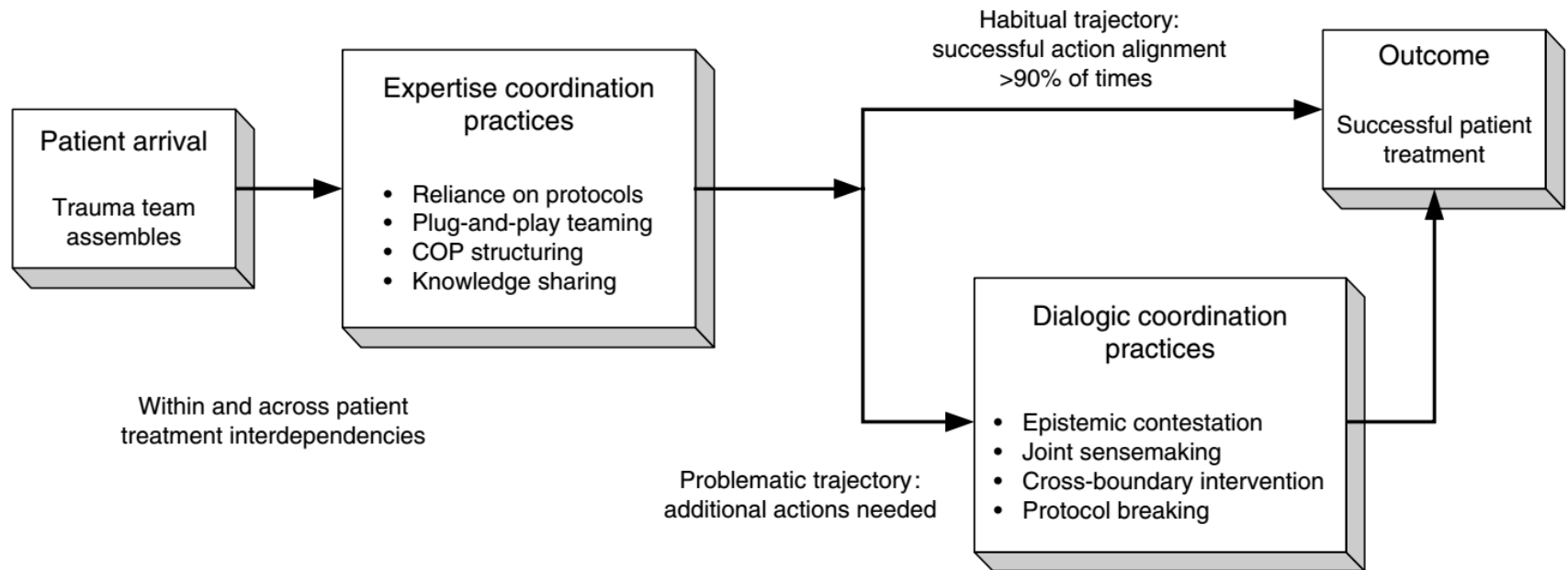
□ Preconditions:

- Broadly shared knowledge base: generalist approach and intensive training
- Leadership: authority migration to front-line: decisions are made where the problems occur
- Non-hierarchical coordination on the front-line

Containment Phase (Faraj/Xiao 2006: 1159)

□ Rules and Rule-breaking

Figure 1 Coordination-Focused Model of Trauma Patient Treatment



Containment Phase

- ❑ Bureaucratic Rules
 - Rules as necessary guidelines (protocols) for dealing with the Unexpected
 - Rules are defined to fit specific (expected) situations
 - To be actionable in novel situations, rule-breaking is inevitable

- ❑ Bureaucratic Rule breaking
 - Who is entitled to break rules?
 - When (under what circumstances) is rule breaking tolerated?
 - How is an erosion of rules prevented?
 - The case of 'practical illegal behavior'
 - Rule breaking leads to success
 - At the time of rule-breaking its successfulness is uncertain

Ability to contain crisis (High-reliable organizing) (adapted from Weick/Sutcliffe 2007)

- Pre-occupation with failure
- Delegation of decision-making to experts
- sensitive on operations
- Learning, fast communication is key
- Do not oversimplify

To Summarize

- ❑ Expecting the Unexpected as Key
- ❑ Unexpected events may turn into crisis: Crisis unfold in phases
- ❑ Each phase demands distinct approaches
 - Chaos phase
 - Containment phase
- ❑ Learn how to accept the Unexpected: structure over strategy

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