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)

Expect the Unexpected

The „Normal“ Anticipation phase

Chaos phase
- Roll-out response structures
- Reduce complexity
- Slowing-down

Containment phase
- Act flexibly on the basis of learned routines
- Improvisation
- Role-switching
- Rule-breaking

The „New Normal“ Anticipation phase
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 discret 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

- Patient arrival
  - Trauma team assembles
  - Expertise coordination practices
    - Reliance on protocols
    - Plug-and-play teaming
    - COP structuring
    - Knowledge sharing
  - Within and across patient treatment interdependencies
  - Problematic trajectory: additional actions needed

- Habitual trajectory: successful action alignment >90% of times

- Dialogic coordination practices
  - Epistemic contestation
  - Joint sensemaking
  - Cross-boundary intervention
  - Protocol breaking

- Outcome
  - Successful 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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References


