

Crises and beyond: Rethink and demystify

Emily Hough reports on *Navigating Beyond Crises*, a book written by a regular author of the CRJ – Thomas Lahnthaler – in which the author explores the human side of leadership and aims to change the way that we view crises

Drawing on his personal involvement in managing a wide and varied range of critical situations, Thomas Lahnthaler's book aims to demystify the term 'crisis'. In doing so, he wants to help planners stop underestimating themselves and encourage us all to think differently about how we prepare to deal with such situations.

The book offers a collection of ideas and insights in a structure that outlines the author's mindset and approach. The result is, according to Lahnthaler: "A mix of practical elements, reflections, learning and thoughts for further exploration." In typically modest fashion, the author notes that he does not claim that this way is the only way or the most effective, but that it is: "my way."

Navigating Beyond Crises aims to take the reader into the heart of crisis management, underpinned by personal anecdotes from the author's work in areas such as Borneo, where he learnt the vital importance of honesty and not giving false hope, and the difficulty of decision-making without sufficient understanding of the context amid the complex issue of famine in the Horn of Africa. He examines resources and how what he terms the "MacGyver mindset" helped during the humanitarian response to an Ebola virus outbreak in West Africa, and he describes many other situations that prove the concept and value of human resilience. Yet, along with these foundations of personal experience, Lahnthaler's medium-length book is packed with practical observations, reflections, and insights that all help to improve understanding of the human dimension of leading in a crisis.

The book is divided into three parts: Fundamentals; Craft; and Application and it is heartening to see that the very first chapter reminds the reader to 'focus on people'. "Crises are a human phenomenon. Thus, crisis management is always human-centric," he says.

Those involved in managing a crisis are also included within this scope. The author emphasises that self-care and self-reflection, although sometimes daunting, can help to ascertain whether a person is suited for the role in question at that particular time. Such reflections require one's physical, mental, and emotional state to be acknowledged, which can be frowned upon in the crisis management sector. Lahnthaler admits that such self-examination led him to fear what he might uncover, namely: "Feelings of pressure, insecurity, uncertainty, and even fear, which I thought might compromise my ability to manage or be involved in managing a crisis. I was also overly concerned that I would be considered unsuitable for the work by my colleagues and managers."

However, he continues: "This was false pride and a misplaced sense of responsibility," because if a leader is

not working to their full potential, it makes the work for everyone else who is involved even more difficult and could affect team morale. "We all have to step away sometimes," he emphasises.

The author's work as a conflict mediator has been useful in viewing the bigger picture within a crisis. In any situation, perspectives and interpretations will differ, influenced by the previous experiences of those called upon to help or lead. Only by creating a common understanding can those managing a crisis ensure that everyone is working in the same direction instead of subconsciously pursuing their own goals. His advice is to start with the basic question: "Are we talking about the same crisis?"

Lahnthaler also examines human dynamics: "Claiming we can ignore emotions and decide rationally in crisis management is unwise and will potentially make managing the crisis more challenging." He continues: "My encouragement to any sceptical leader who might argue that they don't have time for emotions in a crisis is to consider whether they want to spend a little time dealing with this important aspect early on, or a considerably greater deal of time at an unknown and unpredictable point during the crisis." Far from being bad for decision-making, emotions function as an inner compass, revealing information yet to be decoded.

Rollercoaster of endurance

He describes the 'rollercoaster' of long-term endurance and recommends five habits to address and work against fatigue when managing longer-term crises. These include: Voicing frustrations openly; celebrating successes and failures; remembering the person behind the function; forcing breaks; and allowing for humour.

The book then turns to communication, another essential element in any crisis. Reframing the situation to focus on trust and confidence-building is one way forward. Of particular relevance to our post-lockdown world, Lahnthaler cautions against deliberately inducing fear to convey the severity of a situation and to unite audiences in complying with measures. When following one of the key principles of communicating effectively in a crisis, namely honesty, it might seem to be impossible not to reinforce fear, he says, although this does not have to be the case. "The more we stick to simple facts and focus on the positive aspects when it comes to relational elements, the less we create assumptions that cause fear in the audience's mind." A good example of this is in communicating restrictions to the public; it is important to focus on what the positive outcomes will be, rather than dwelling on why restrictions are being imposed.

Lahnthaler also discusses honesty, sense-making, and the vital importance of truly understanding ‘the multitude of stakeholders’ in any given crisis. This advice appears, at first glance, to be obvious, but reading inquiry and post-incident reports over the years shows that such understanding is still, sadly, often lacking.

Direct, practical advice includes thinking of messaging as a sales pitch - in other words, keeping it short, with the most important message at the beginning, and always applying the ‘nice to know/need to know test’ in communication. This review cannot do full justice to the advice provided in this section without repeating it verbatim, but it is admirable to see how Lahnthaler sums it all up in a few, concise key points.

In presentations and talks on behalf of the *Crisis Response Journal* over the years, I have often emphasised that crises present a vacuum, the principle of plenism (how nature abhors a vacuum), and how those leading must be aware of this in order to manage the situation effectively, whether in communications or when handling the crisis itself. All too often, one small event becomes a cascade, a tsunami of interlinked and often dangerous consequences. Crises also often reveal repeated failures in decision-making or missed signals leading up to the situation. The author echoes these thoughts, then elaborates, saying that crises: “Are moments when change is inevitable and will happen regardless of what we decide.”

Actions and distractions

Every crisis situation also predetermines certain actions to be taken, leading the author to question a perceived feeling of helplessness and frustration that can feel overwhelming

for managers and leaders. In his view, this is often because “We’re not the ones who chose those options.” Furthermore, these predetermined actions can distract from the realisation that this is: “A perfect moment to create our own solutions.” Yet, the chance to create such new solutions, to react reflexively and creatively, is usually dismissed owing to an understandable fear that this might add risk to an already difficult situation. The fact remains, however, that the response to a crisis makes the difference between: “A missed opportunity or a golden chance,” and the author argues for reinvention as a proactive approach.

He outlines several habits to this end, including: Make your purpose your anchor; apply creative flexibility; ensure continuous competency development; identify ways to learn effectively; foster a reinventor’s mentality; and always look for alternative solutions. After all, he says: “Resilience, endurance and reinventive ability are all deeply rooted in our mindset. All these traits can be trained and built over time.”

The book turns next to resources, and Lahnthaler suggests that we must get into a mindset that considers everything as a potential resource in a crisis, eliminating blind spots, discovering hidden resources, and finding alternative ways to use them. He also emphasises the importance of using resources - both tangible and intangible - considerately and remembering that any resources that are called in will be taken from elsewhere, warning: “If we focus our attention on one thing, we have less capacity to deal with something else.” This is a wise, and somewhat self-evident principle, but as the Covid-19 measures in many countries have shown, it is a one that is still often neglected or misunderstood.



Following this, the section on practising habitual readiness offers a further truism: “There is a plan, and there is reality,” says Lahnthaler, adding that no plan can be truly comprehensive. “Crisis occurs within crisis, making them like Russian Matryoshka dolls,” he notes. “Preparing for all of these eventualities is neither feasible, nor realistic.”

Again, although not specifically mentioned, recent Covid-19 management springs to mind when reading this chapter, which discusses the fine line to be managed between wanting to include as much as possible in a plan, and the desire to keep the plan simple. Complexity becomes even more evident in large-scale crises, particularly when different actors develop their own plans: “Each from their own point of view and with their own interests in mind when a crisis evolves. These plans frequently prove to be competitive rather than complementary.”

There are other problems in planning that, according to the author, can be ‘blockers’ of innovative solutions. This chapter is an interesting analysis of those many areas that we are already aware of, but that are frustratingly persistent, and the author sheds light on why this might be the case. Among the key takeaways in this section, Lahnthaler warns about the assumption trap, summarises the aim of readiness, and says that working with habits is one of the most effective ways to develop crisis readiness.

Turning to the ‘Application’ section, the author first looks at the many sides to the term ‘crisis’, arguing that it is a: “Label that requires a multitude of perspectives to develop a comprehensive picture,” and that: “We have become too flippant, too liberal, and too inflammatory,” with the use of the word. What follows is an interesting discussion

about the labels, communication, politics, accountability, and decision-making when it comes to a crisis. “Crisis are periods where systems are being challenged, as they need to be significantly altered or overthrown. It’s important to map out and understand the system being challenged if one hopes to manage it effectively.”

One of the most important ways of dealing with the unknown, contends Lahnthaler, is to: “Focus on your scope of leverage,” and he expands upon the many ways and benefits of doing so.

This leads us to the section on making confident decisions and the role of intuition, the latter of which, according to Lahnthaler, is more often than not based on crucial knowledge and value-based reactions.

In essence, this book is a call to demystify the term ‘crisis’, for all those involved in this field to stop underestimating themselves, to prepare themselves differently, and to become “Adventurers and explorers.”

For, as Lahnthaler says: “Every crisis is a pathway into undiscovered territory. If we are ready, we can turn those situations into the chance to find our ways and explore what’s waiting... The beauty of the unknown is that it’s nothing but the future. And the future is built on our decisions.” **C·R·J**

■ *Navigating Beyond Crisis*, by Thomas Lahnthaler, is published by The Crisis Compass Ltd, ISBN 978-1-7396286, www.thecrisiscompass.com.

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