Issues of Diversity in Crisis Management

By Dr. PETER D. OSILAJA

Our world is changing. Forces of constant change, chaos, and complexity are replacing forces of stability and permanence that prevailed over our way of life. Methods of organizing such as top-down, command and control, monocentrism of viewpoints and culture, are being challenged and are proving to be ineffective in our education, religion, politics, and government. The predictable, permanent, homogenous community is now rare. Climate change adds to the instability and may have caused more tornadoes, floods, and earthquakes than ever witnessed. Man-made disasters have also become a great threat. The war zone has been widened as ordinary folks who feel aggrieved now have easier access to very potent polemic equipment and are willing to use them on fellow citizens.

Globalization and technology are the main economic factors driving this change. Globalization and technology, particularly communications technology, are enabling great access, both geographical and informational, thus creating a leveler field. These have yielded products en-mass, population migration, individualization, specialization, and great diversity – diversity of choices, affiliations, culture, beliefs, organizing, markets, etc.

Research indicates that diversity tends to be beneficial when allowed to flourish. When people think of diversity, they tend to refer to race and ethnicity. Daniel Levi, in his 2001 book “Group Dynamics for Teams,” prescribes that true diversity has three compartments – psychological (values, personality), demographic (gender, race, ethnicity, age) and organizational (tenure, occupation, status). In reality, diversity has always been around us but was suppressed or completely ignored. Conformity and uniformity were the bureaucratic methods established for controlling and seeing society. Fueled by globalization and technology (and climate change), econocentric perspectives have shown their flaws and limitations in managing variations and complexities, leading to frequent crises.

Traditional Approaches to Planning

In their 2005 article, “Post-crisis Discourse and Organizational Change,” Seeger, Ulmer, Novak, & Sellnow describe crisis as a “specific, unexpected, and non-routine event or series of events which creates high levels of uncertainty and threat or perceived threat to an organization’s high priority goals.” A crisis will generally have a “low probability/high consequence,” such that it defies interpretation, thereby imposing severe demands on sensemaking.

The words “crisis,” “disaster,” and “emergency” are sometimes used synonymously to describe a disruption to a system that causes a breakdown of structures, routines, procedures, rules, norms, and relationships and beliefs. Individuals, groups/teams, and organization/communities can be affected by crisis, sometimes differently. For this study and report, we focus on crisis effect on organization/community and use both words synonymously.

Traditionally, a crisis is seen as an event that could have been avoided. Crisis discourse generally has a retrospective focus. Our current systems of managing and planning are therefore largely reactive and normative. They are based on rationality. The processes are top-down, command and control, and cause and effect oriented.

Failures in crisis and disaster management, such as the Katrina disaster and home mortgage crises, demonstrate that there may be fundamental problems in the way we continue to plan, particularly amidst the unpredictability of the next crisis. After 9/11, we had Katrina, then the Virginia Tech shooting, and now a mortgage crisis.

Yet, normative adjustments remain modus operandi. We fix the problem based on the flaws of the last crisis. We keep making the same mistakes, crisis after crisis, because we are not looking at the big picture.

Poor leadership, communication, under- and over-estimation of risk, flexibility, cooperation, command structures, and trust between agencies or authorities are the usual culprits. Crisis managers are asked to think outside the box but largely remain in the box. So do the structures surrounding decision-making, even during crisis. Absence of resources: education, budget, authority, experience, and support further restrain the practitio-

In light of the recent frequent and unpredictable crises and disasters, and amidst the growing diversity our society is experiencing, a study was recently conducted to investigate the presence and importance of diversity and sensemaking in crisis management planning, as perceived by crisis management planners for diverse communities. Study results reveal that planners perceive issues of diversity and sensemaking to be of high importance, yet presently low in current crisis management practice.
ners. Emergency managers historically come from military, law enforcement, and fire. Even the military has had to change its tactics to fight the new type of urban warfare. There is now a call from the disaster management field to increase the diversity in the disaster management profession to include women, minorities, and professionals from varied disciplines. Scholars have also been attracted to the field due to its seminal nature.

Emergent Concepts
Whereas a normative approach to crisis management planning has its place and usefulness, many researchers now purport that a crisis is and should be looked at as a natural stage in an ongoing evolution and an important part of the learning process. An emergent perception is to view crisis as an illumination of reality that may raise the awareness for evaluation and change. Although infrequent, unexpected, abnormal, sometimes seemingly devastating, crises and disasters can be experienced richly as precipitous to learning and change. The Chinese language interpretation and symbol for crisis is opportunity. Crisis is potentially a natural outcome of dysfunction within, between and among individuals, organizations, and cultures. When we juxtapose these factors with climatic, technological and multicultural issues, we see the need for diversity and integration in our planning. A crisis or disaster is inevitable in a complex system.

Need for Diversity in Planning
If crises and disasters have become unpredictable, calamitous, and inevitable, more emphasis should be placed on helping people to prepare, react, and respond to them. The effort to engage the communities in disaster preparedness has been dismal. Philosopher Jurgen Herbamas wrote in 1975, “A crisis cannot be separated from those experiencing it.” Besides the efforts of physical prevention, we can help people better make sense of the situation when they are well informed, are participants in the planning, establish trust prior, etc. Our response teams and efforts must also reflect and be adaptive to the changing circumstances and demographics. We must integrate diversity factors into our planning.

When it comes to diversity, we have moved from ignorance to suppression to awareness to acceptance and now, our challenge is integration. According to the United Nations statistics, the number of people living outside their countries of origin rose from 96 million to 174 million between 1980 and 2000. “The central challenge for modern diversifying societies (therefore) is to create a new, broader sense of ‘we,’” Putnam wrote in his best seller, “Bowling Alone.” Margaret Wheatley, in 2004, added that the benefits of diversity emerge not from the variation of races and ethnicity (demographic diversity) but from the presence of different outlooks and specializations – a cognitive influence of diversity

Emergent organizational theories now emphasize systems that are flexible, adaptable, and integrated. For instance, after 9/11, while cockpit doors in planes were hardened, little was done to protect from plastics and liquid explosives until recently in 2006. On the other hand, a federal directive for pilots to possess guns in flight was finally scrapped after many pilots and airlines protested. These are typical emergency management reactions to a disaster in an effort to prevent another, similar to the last. “They are reactive, not proactive,” said Retired Air Force Col. Randall J. Larson. And so, Hurricane Katrina struck to find us unprepared. “We are asked to think outside the box but we remain in the box.” Meanwhile, our society continues to grow in complexity; climatically, technologically, and culturally.

Our systems of governance and education, for instance, are not changing at the pace of rapid diversity.

Sensemaking Communication
Communication is the key to sensemaking in crisis: The more affected we are by the situation the more information we need. The continuous flow of information gives people the capacity to respond intelligently to crisis situations. Effective communication among organization members, stakeholders, the public, response teams, volunteers, the media, and governmental and non-governmental agencies before, during, and in the aftermath of crisis often is viewed as a significant benchmark for success or failure in crisis. Given our changing circumstances, diversity and sensemaking in crisis management planning could be the cornerstone of political “success.”

Sensemaking is the process of generating and interpreting a social world to form a shared meaning, at times, from complex and divergent perspectives. Sensemaking in crisis cannot be effective in today’s multi-cultural communities without consideration for diversity. Through the exploration of our diversity, we begin to collate our common needs and aspirations. In his article, “Enacted Sensemaking in Crisis Situation,” Weick (1988) wrote...
that the less sensemaking process directed at a crisis, the more likely that the crisis will get out of hand. The entity (individual, leader, group, organization, or community) has the opportunity to fundamentally reframe a crisis through renewal discourse, focusing on the opportunities that arise from it within the context of shared values of that particular entity. Sensemaking that ensues from accurate and current information also potentially controls panic and overreaction that sometimes lead to additional losses.

In their European study on multicultural communication, Falkheimer and Heide (2006) propose the use of ethnicity, focusing collective cultural identity as dynamic, relational, and situational in crisis theory and practice. Current mass and system oriented crisis communication paradigms could be replaced with a culturally sensitive and reflexive perspective. The authors purport that “crisis communication should be understood and analyzed as a ‘sensemaking’ process, where reality is negotiated and constructed in cultural contexts and situations rather than distributed from sender to recipient.”

Identity is the sense-making capacity of the organization; it begins with the individuals, goes to groups, and forms the culture of the organization. Today, for diverse communities, it is important to understand and incorporate everyone’s views into the way we organize. Communities in crisis can re-enact their world through discourse to make sense of what just happened in ways that lead to better understanding and acceptance. In some cases, this post-crisis interpretation may be so compelling that it yields extraordinary efforts by members to rebuild and recreate the organization.

**Challenges of Implementation**

Many organizations will tell you they are for diversity and are active in its pursuit and implementation. The reality is that attitudes are entrenched and are hard to change. Kaman Lee (2005) in “Crisis, Culture, Community,” suggests the negligence of a culture-based crisis management planning may reflect underlying ethno-centrism among researchers and practitioners.

It may also be a trap that they slip into unconsciously. In other cases, planners’ view of diversity is narrow and at times, convenient. “We can’t get people on the other side to participate,” “We embrace diversity,” and “We’ve met the federal mandates for issues such as special needs assessment.” “There’s no budget for outreach programs.” So in the face of rapid multi-culturalization, mainstream diversity management and literature continues to focus disproportionately on how the “diverse” shall adjust to the system.

A crisis or disaster will inevitably expose the flaws and inequities in the system. That has a way of exacerbating the crisis. Think of the images of Katrina and the poor leadership response. It behooves complex organizations in diverse communities to not only incorporate diversity and sensemaking into their planning, but they should also be able to measure such in their plans and operations.

To date, for example, there are only few obscure studies of the special role of women in homes, teams and communities in time of crisis, noted Elena Enarson (1988) in her article, “Through Women’s Eyes.”

**Components of Diversity and Sensemaking in Crisis**

As organizations move the diversity concept beyond simple quantification (number of blacks, number of female contractors, etc.), their challenge now and in the future is achieving true integration. The full benefits of diversity and sensemaking in emergent organization planning cannot be fully realized with minimal integration of the different components of the system. Many who find themselves in the fringe will tell you how their views and participation are suppressed even when nominally counted in. Therefore, successful diversity and integration cannot and should not be measured by quantity alone but also by quality. This is so because, in the increasing complexities of communities and crises, diversity and sensemaking become critical tools to reckon with for safety and effective response to crisis.

Extensive research and synthesis of the literature on crisis management, organization and diversity theories helped this research to identify six prevailing components of diversity and sensemaking in crisis management for diverse organizations and communities. They are flexibility, inclusion, trust, risk perception, adaptability and equitability. These components were found to be most consistent throughout both theory and practical literature. These variables (components) and their definitions relative to crisis management were presented to several experts for validation and subsequently pilot tested. Finally, in March 2008, a full study was conducted at the Disaster Recovery Journal (DRJ) conference to measure the viability of these variables in disaster management as perceived by planners attending the national conference on business continuity planning.
Findings:
1) With statistical significance, respondents perceived these variables of diversity to be low in their respective disaster management practice.
2) With statistical significance, they also perceived the variables to be of high importance in crisis management planning for diverse communities.
3) A wide gap therefore exists between current practice and a desired state of diversity conscious disaster management planning. See Table 1.

Specifically, risk perception and flexibility were ranked highest, both in presence and in importance by all demographics who participated in the survey. See table 2. Equitability, Inclusion and trust ranked lowest for both presence and importance, respectively.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables of Diversity</th>
<th>High or Very High (4 and 5 combined)</th>
<th>Presence</th>
<th>Importance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Flexibility</td>
<td></td>
<td>28.8%</td>
<td>72.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inclusion</td>
<td></td>
<td>11.6%</td>
<td>47.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trust</td>
<td></td>
<td>21.6%</td>
<td>60.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Risk Perception</td>
<td></td>
<td>32.3%</td>
<td>75.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adaptability</td>
<td></td>
<td>23.9%</td>
<td>63.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Equitability</td>
<td></td>
<td>18.0%</td>
<td>59.6%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2. Comparison of High Ratings (4 and 5 combined) Presence and Importance.

Women, however, generally ranked the diversity and sense-making variables of equitability, inclusion, and trust higher than their male counterpart for importance. See table 3.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Special Training</th>
<th>Years of Experience</th>
<th>Profession/Industry</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Flexibility</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inclusion</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trust</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Risk Perception</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adaptability</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Equitability</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3: Statistically Significant Difference in Importance of Variables by Demography

Implications:
1. Utilizing the variables of diversity and sensemaking established in this research, the planners themselves found their disaster management program to be flawed or inadequate without adequate consideration for diversity and sensemaking.
2. With the establishment of these variables, it is now possible for institutions to scientifically and correctly measure the presence of diversity in their management program.

Opportunities for future study:
1. Further studies need to be conducted of these variables to test their consistency and validity as comprehensive and true measurements of diversity, not only amongst emergency and crisis management planners but also with organizations in general, particularly those who are looking to effectively measure the effectiveness of their diversity programs. Dollar or demographic measures are limiting and could be manipulated.
2. If disaster response planners perceive a significant gap between current and desired practice for inclusion of diversity and sensemaking in disaster management planning, it would be interesting to measure the perception of ordinary citizens on the same matter, particularly those who recently experienced a disaster.
3. If planners acknowledge a gap, what are the steps needed to close the gap and what may be the obstacles?

Conclusion
Diversity as a concept and as the way we live is here to stay. Our organizing often lags behind new realities.

Don Beck in his influential book, “Spiral Dynamic” writes, “It is time to create the new models that have in them the complexity that makes the older systems obsolete. And to the extent that we can do that, and do that quickly, I think we can provide what will be necessary for a major breakthrough for the future.”

Studies show repeatedly that diversity fosters creativity and gives decision-making strength.

This study insinuates the need for more diversity to foster strength in decision-making and also the need for incorporating sensemaking in our crisis planning.

In our crisis and disaster management planning, we ought to be able to exercise flexibility; include as many components as possible in the planning; cultivate trust between groups and neighbors prior to crisis; learn to better measure risk; temper our response accordingly; learn to adapt to the changing environment; and strive for equitability before, during, and in the aftermath of crisis.

Most importantly, we need to be able to assess our level of preparedness vis-à-vis diversity and sensemaking in planning. These variables provide tools for such assessment. The sooner we adopt these variables in our planning, the more lives we will be able to save and the more we will be perceived as effective-successful!

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