



## Entering new territory: A study of internal crisis management and crisis communication in organizations

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### ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to present and discuss some of the main findings from a large survey of internal crisis management and crisis communication conducted in the spring of 2011 among public and private organizations in Denmark (the ICMCC survey). The survey was conducted among the 367 largest private companies (selected from DK 1000, established by Børsen business magasin) and among 98 public organizations (municipalities). The overall goal was to get a preliminary idea of how these companies or organizations perceive, plan, coordinate and implement internal crisis management and crisis communication activities before, during and after a crisis. The survey questionnaire comprised 36 questions and was sent to respondents who typically are responsible for the crisis-preparedness of their organizations. The results from the survey show that the vast majority of organizations have a crisis or contingency plan, and most of these plans contain an internal dimension relating to the management and communication with the internal stakeholders during a crisis. Thus, the study shows a rather professional and formalized behavior towards crisis management in general, but also when it comes to managing a crisis in relation to the internal organizational stakeholders in specific. In addition, the results clearly indicate a strong relation between organizational size and crisis management; the larger the organization the more likely to have a crisis plan. This particularly pertained to the private organizations. The ICMCC survey forms part of a major collaborative research project, financed by the Danish Council for Independent Research/Social Sciences (2011–2014), entitled Internal Crisis Management and Crisis Communication in Danish Organizations. The purpose of this three-year long project is to shed light upon the role of internal crisis management and crisis communication before, during and after an organizational crisis and/or a societal crisis leading to downsizing or major changes within an organization or an organizational field.

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### 1. Introduction

To create organizational commitment and identification is one of the important challenges for internal communication in private and public organizations. However, the challenge seems to grow bigger when the organization finds itself in a crisis situation. Studies have shown that employees, who used to be proud of their organization, change their perception of the organization according to crisis type (product recall, mismanagement, rumors, etc.), and the manager's handling of the crisis situation (cf. Aggerholm, 2009; Mansour-Cole & Scott, 1998).

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Within the last decade or so, crisis communication researchers have primarily focused on the external dimension of crisis communication, that is, the crisis response strategies applied by an organization after a crisis in an attempt to restore or protect its image and/or reputation among external stakeholders (Benoit, 1995; Coombs, 1999; Johansen & Frandsen, 2007). However, we still know only very little about what is going on inside an organization in crisis (cf. Frandsen & Johansen, 2011). Apart from a few exceptions as for instance research studies in *crisis sensemaking* in continuation of Karl Weick's seminal article "Enacted sensemaking in crisis situations" (1988), the organization internal dimension of crises, crisis management and crisis communication have by and large been unexplored.

The studies conducted within the field of crisis sensemaking are first and foremost characterized by qualitative case studies with the purpose of examining how organizational members create meaning at an organizational micro-level as a crisis unfolds in various contexts, or how sensemaking takes place at a societal macro-level at the end of a crisis through the study of reports and other documents from public inquiries.

The purpose of this paper is different. With this paper we want to present and discuss the main findings from a large, quantitative survey of internal crisis management and crisis communication conducted in the spring of 2011 among public and private organizations in Denmark by a group of researchers at ASB Center for Corporate Communication, Aarhus University. The survey is termed the Internal Crisis Management and Crisis Communication Survey (hereafter: the ICMCC survey). More specifically, the aim of the survey is to answer how middle managers, who are knowledgeable about and responsible for the internal crisis management and/or crisis communication function in private and public organizations *perceive* the following four areas:

- (a) *Organizational crises in general* (including experiences of previous crises).
- (b) The typical *patterns of reaction* and the typical *perception of causes, development and consequences* in crisis situations among the organizations' top and middle managers as well as employees (among these: the impact of factors such as type of crisis, job function and educational background).
- (c) The *formal crisis-preparedness* within the organization classified into (1) internal crisis management (e.g. formulated crisis management plans, crisis management teams and other proactive steps taken to handle in particular the internal crisis dimension) and (2) internal crisis communication (e.g. communication channels, appointment of internal spokespersons, communication from top and middle management as well as the role of the news media).
- (d) The *quality* of the organizations' formal internal crisis-preparedness and *the need* to improve this crisis-preparedness.

As mentioned above, such a comprehensive, empirical study of the internal dimensions of crises, crisis management and crisis communication within organizations has never been conducted before. General surveys of the crisis-preparedness of private and/or public organizations have already been conducted (cf. Frandsen & Johansen, 2004), but nobody has so far brought up the crucial question: How do organizations deal with the organization internal dimension?

The paper consists of six sections. First, the literature on internal crisis management and crisis communication is reviewed. Second, we make a general introduction to the collaborative research project, financed by the Danish Council for Independent Research/Social Sciences (2011–2014), entitled *Internal Crisis Management and Crisis Communication in Danish Organizations*, which the survey is part of. Third, the theoretical framework and the research questions of the ICMCC survey are briefly presented. Fourth, the research design is explained, and fifth, we present selected results. Finally, we discuss the results with specific reference to the correlations between internal crisis management/crisis communication, on one hand, and factors such as organizational size and having a crisis management plan/a crisis management team, on the other. We conclude with a few statements concerning the limitations of the study and implications for future research.

## 2. Literature review

According to the European Communication Monitor, a survey conducted on an annual basis in a large number of European countries by the European Public Relations Education and Research Association ([www.euprera.org](http://www.euprera.org)) in collaboration with the European Association of Communication Directors (EACD) and the *Communication Director Magazine*, two of the disciplines or fields of practice that the respondents expect will gain importance in the future, are *internal communication* and *crisis communication*. In the first European Communication Monitor, conducted in 2007, 1087 communication professionals from 22 countries were asked: "How important are the following fields of practice in your organization? Will they gain more or less importance within the next three years?" Thirty-four percent of the respondents answered that internal communication was an important field of practice in 2007, and 69% expected the discipline to gain importance in 2010. Similarly, 35% of the respondents answered that crisis communication was an important field of practice in 2007, and 58% expected the discipline to gain importance in 2010 (Zerfass, Van Ruler, Rogojinaru, Vercic, & Hamrefors, 2007, p. 13). In spite of the expected importance, the combination of these two disciplines or fields of practice, that is, *internal crisis communication* (defined as the communicative interaction among managers and employees, in a private or public organization, before, during and after an organizational or societal crisis) is still an under-researched area.

Although factors of relevance for the study of the organization internal dimension of crises are touched upon now and then in the literature, this sort of research is seldom thematized as *internal crisis management* and *crisis communication*. Key examples of such factors are: *Decision-making in crisis situations* (Boin, 't Hart, Stern, & Sundelius, 2005; Janis, 1982), *crisis perception* (Penrose, 2000), *defense mechanisms* (Pauchant & Mitroff, 1992), *organizational learning* (Roux-Dufort, 2000),

and the impact of *organizational culture* or the “personalities of organizations” on the organizations’ ability to handle a crisis (Mitroff, 2004). When internal crisis management and crisis communication are finally thematized, only very short chapters or sections of a book or a journal article are devoted to the topic. A good example of this is Fearn-Banks’ (1996) excellence theory of crisis public relations, where there is a short section on “Communicating with Internal Publics” containing a set of normative advices about how to communicate with what the author terms a “functional public” before and during an organizational crisis. The exceptions from this are not only very few, they are also often only accessible in other languages than English (cf. Mazzei, 2009). For a literature review that also comprises the more practical oriented literature on internal crisis management and crisis communication, see Frandsen and Johansen (2011).

So far, Karl E. Weick’s theory of retrospective sensemaking (Weick, 1979, 1995, 2001, 2009), focusing especially on situations where organizational sensemaking breaks down, typically in a change or crisis situation where demands on sensemaking can be severe, has been the most important and comprehensive contribution to the study of the organization internal dimension of crises, crisis management and crisis communication. Weick’s (1988) study of the Bhopal disaster, later updated in Weick (2010), and Weick’s (1993) study of the Mann Gulch fire are often regarded as paradigmatic exemplars of how to conduct a sensemaking study, and the starting gun for a stream of research labelled *crisis sensemaking*. In the first article, Weick investigates how “action that is instrumental to understanding the crisis often intensifies the crisis” (Weick, 1988, p. 305) (the theory of enactment and enacted environments), and how commitment, capacity, and expectations have an impact on sensemaking in crisis situations. In the second article, Weick defines crises as cosmology episodes: “A cosmology episode occurs when people suddenly and deeply feel that the universe is no longer a rational, orderly system. What makes such an episode so shattering is that both the sense of what is occurring and the means to rebuild that sense collapse together” (Weick, 1993, p. 105).

The studies conducted within the field of crisis sensemaking are first and foremost characterized by qualitative casestudies with the purpose of examining (1) how organizational members create meaning at an organizational micro-level as a crisis unfolds in various contexts (Kayes, 2004; Weick, 1990, 1993, 2010; Weick & Sutcliffe, 2003; Wicks, 2002), or (2) how sensemaking takes place at a societal macro-level at the end of a crisis through the study of reports and other documents from public inquiries (Brown, 2000; Gephart, 1992, 1993, 2007) (for an overview of crisis sensemaking research, see Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010). Weick and Sutcliffe (2001, 2007) have contributed to the ongoing debate about anticipation versus resilience – the formal crisis-preparedness (crisis management plan, crisis management team) established before a crisis breaks out (pre-crisis stage) versus the ability of organizational members to bounce back after the crisis has broken out (crisis stage or post-crisis stage) – with their study of *collective mindfulness* in high reliability organizations.

We want to conclude this brief literature review by joining Taylor (2010) when she emphasizes the importance of the organization internal dimension of crises, crisis management and crisis communication:

“The future of crisis communication research is in studying and understanding the internal dynamics of organizations. The future for crisis communication researchers and practitioners is in answering the “how” and “why”. By asking these questions, we can look at gaps in organizational relationships, restrictive infrasystems and failed processes that stop organizations from catching problems before they become a crisis. [...] Communication and relationships are at the center of this internal communication approach to crisis communication. The future direction of the field is not in the continued focus on crisis practitioners and organizational responses in crisis. The people affected by Firestone’s tires, Merck’s Vioxx, or Menu Foods’ tainted pet food scandal will never be comforted to know that the organization’s crisis responses included apologia, denial, or shifting the blame. What will make them feel better is to know that there were real organizational changes implemented that will ensure that these problems never affect anyone ever again” (Taylor, 2010, p. 703).

We hope that the ICMCC survey will enable us to take a small step forward into this new territory applying a mixed methods approach.

### 3. Internal crisis management and crisis communication in Danish organizations: a collaborative research project

The ICMCC survey constitutes the first exploratory part of a major collaborative research project, funded by the Danish Council for Independent Research/Social Sciences (2011–2014) and entitled *Internal Crisis Management and Crisis Communication in Danish Organizations*. This research project consists of the following four subprojects:

- (a) A *mapping study* of internal crisis management and crisis communication in private companies and public organizations (municipalities) in Denmark. Main findings from this study (the ICMCC survey) are presented in this paper.
- (b) A study of *crisis perception and crisis-preparedness* in private companies in Denmark. This subproject builds on Frandsen and Johansen’s (2004) study of the crisis-preparedness of private companies and public authorities in Denmark, where some of the findings indicated that there was no immediate correlation between the crisis perception of the organizations and their crises experience, and that the crisis perception, not the crisis experience, had a strong impact on the initiatives taken in order to optimize the organizational crisis-preparedness. The purpose of the subproject is to study if the members of one and the same organization perceive the same crisis types in the same way, and if not, if there are individual and/or organizational factors that can explain the differences.

- (c) A study of *organizational resilience, internal crisis communication, and crisis culture* in private companies in Denmark. This subproject takes its starting point in the ongoing debate within the field of crisis management concerning anticipation versus resilience (e.g. Wildavsky, 1988). Should an organization, in order to optimize its crisis-preparedness, rely on anticipation (focus on the pre-crisis stage: a formal crisis management plan) or on resilience (focus on the post-crisis stage: the ability among organizational members to “bounce back”)? Or should the organization combine these two approaches? The purpose of the study is to examine how the internal (crisis) communication, the organizational structure, and the crisis culture (i.e. a specific dimension of the formal as well as the informal organizational culture, including safety culture, error management culture, risk or crisis perception) either strengthen or weaken the organizational resilience of private companies in relation to crises.
- (d) A study of *the influence of the news media* on the understanding and reactions to crises among employees and on the internal crisis communication. This subproject is based on a study of downsizing and organizational communication (Aggerholm, 2009) in which employee interviewees indicated that positive or negative news media coverage of the downsizing process had an effect on their organizational commitment and interests in serving as “corporate ambassadors”. The purpose of the subproject is to study how the news media’s coverage of crises affects the organizational members and the organizational communication, including a study of the rhetorical strategies used by management communication in an attempt to refute the media coverage, and the influence of the media coverage on the organizational identity among the employees.

The overall goal of the collaborative research project is to increase our body of knowledge about the scale, nature and importance of internal crisis communication before, during and after a crisis situation as well as to contribute to the development of new theories, models, and concepts within the field of crisis management and crisis communication. For further information, see the website of the research project at: [www.asb.dk/forskning/forskningscentreoggrupper/forskningscentre/asbcc/forskning/aktuelleforskningsprojekter/internkrise/](http://www.asb.dk/forskning/forskningscentreoggrupper/forskningscentre/asbcc/forskning/aktuelleforskningsprojekter/internkrise/).

#### 4. Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework of the ICMCC survey consists of three main components. First, a strategic, proactive and process-oriented approach to crisis management and crisis communication is applied as the theoretical foundation of the survey. Organizational crises are viewed as dynamic processes containing three stages: a pre-crisis stage, a crisis stage, and a post-crisis stage. Organizational crises are also viewed as something that can be avoided if the organizations know how to handle them in a strategic and proactive way (e.g. crisis prevention and preparation) (Johansen & Frandsen, 2007). Second, a theory of internal stakeholders that is based on the assumption that employees have a stronger and more complex psychological dimension, that is, they are “closer” to the organization than most other stakeholder groups (Frandsen & Johansen, 2011). And finally, an interactive communication model where employees are viewed not only as passive receivers but also as active participants who take their own communicative initiatives trying to make sense of crisis situations; and who to a certain extent can be mobilized communicatively by the organization in crisis (Frandsen & Johansen, 2011).

Taking into account these three components the ICMCC survey is based on the following set of research questions:

- (a) How do members of private companies and municipalities in Denmark (from top management and middle managers to employees) *perceive* organizational crises in general, that is, understand the course of events leading to crises, their causes and consequences (including the reactions to crises among employees)?
- (b) How do private companies and municipalities approach the internal dimension of *crisis management*? What kind of strategic instruments do they typically apply before, during, and after a crisis? For example: How is the internal dimension incorporated in crisis management plans and crisis management teams?
- (c) How do private companies and municipalities approach the internal dimension of *crisis communication*? What kind of strategic instruments do they typically apply before, during, and after a crisis? For example: Do they have an internal spokesperson? And what are the most commonly used communication channels?
- (d) Is there a correlation between organizational size or having a crisis management plan/crisis management team (crisis manager), on one hand, and the internal crisis management and crisis communication of private companies and municipalities, on the other?

#### 5. Research design

Data for this study was collected from Danish organizations in the public and private areas. In the public sector the survey was sent to 98 municipalities and 71 of them returned the survey for a 72% response rate. In the private sector, 367 organizations from the *Børsen business magasin* DK 1000 corporate listing were selected for this study. Companies were first contacted by phone to verify their contact information and then the survey was sent to the contact person they suggested. In the private sector 166 companies returned the survey for a response rate of 45%. Thus, for this study results are reported based on a total sample of 237 organizations. Nineteen percent of these organizations had less than 249 employees, 17% had between 250 and 499 employees, 13% had between 500 and 999 employees, 12% had between 1000 and 1999 employees, 21% had between 2000 and 4999, 11% had between 5000 and 9999 employees, and 7% had more than 10,000 employees.

The survey questionnaire was sent to chief communications officers, human resource managers and/or other managers responsible for the crisis-preparedness of the organizations and comprised 36 questions divided into five overall sections (i.e. personal information, crisis perception, internal crisis management, internal crisis communication and perception of future needs). Participants had three weeks to answer the survey. Fifty-six percent of the organizational representatives who answered the survey were males, and 67% were between the ages of 40 and 59. Additionally, 89% of the respondents reported having crisis management as part of their function, but only 30% had any education in crisis management. Finally, 53% of the respondents had worked for their organizations less than 5 years.

## 6. Results

In this section, we present the main results of the ICMCC survey. The presentation is divided into five subsections. The first subsection concerns the respondents' perceptions of employee reactions to organizational crises. The second subsection deals with internal crisis communication. The third subsection is about internal crisis management and the effects of having a crisis management plan on crisis management practices. The fourth subsection is about the effects of organizational size on crisis management practices. In the last subsection, we finally report about how the respondents evaluated their ability to handle the organization internal dimension of crises together with their views on needs for further competency development in terms of internal crisis management and crisis communication.

### 6.1. Perceptions of employee reactions to crises

Before we explored the way that the organizations in our sample managed crisis, we asked respondents to report on their perceptions, from a managerial point of view, of employee reactions to crisis events. To understand general perceptions we calculated the mean and standard deviations for the responses. Given that we had a 5-point Likert scale, responses that were below 2.5 were considered low, those that were above 3.5 were considered high, and the rest were considered neutral.

As can be seen in Table 1, when considering the total sample there were four employee reactions to crises that were perceived as low: Panic ( $M=2.43$ ,  $SD=1.03$ ), leaving the organization ( $M=2.41$ ,  $SD=.98$ ), feeling betrayed ( $M=2.47$ ,  $SD=1.01$ ) and feeling ashamed ( $M=2.41$ ,  $SD=1.01$ ). These feelings were especially low in private organizations. On the other hand, respondents perceived that during crisis employees would show higher levels of frustration ( $M=3.78$ ,  $SD=.85$ ), higher perceptions of insecurity ( $M=3.90$ ,  $SD=.90$ ), a greater need for information ( $M=4.66$ ,  $SD=.64$ ) and produce more informal communication ( $M=3.89$ ,  $SD=.85$ ). It is important to note that these perceptions did not differ based on size of the organization or whether the organization had a crisis plan.

### 6.2. Internal crisis communication

To gain general insights into how the respondents were dealing with internal communication and the employees in a crisis situation, the survey included questions on topics such as internal communication channels, internal spokespersons, management communication, guidelines or policies, employees as ambassadors and initiators of communication, psychological crisis counseling, and the role of external media coverage.

**Table 1**  
Perceptions of employee reactions to crises.

	Total sample		Private		Municipalities	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Passive	2.73	.98	2.67	1.00	2.87	.94
Panic	<b>2.43</b>	1.03	<b>2.44</b>	1.04	<b>2.39</b>	1.01
Loss of confidence	3.07	1.04	3.04	1.07	3.13	.97
Identification	2.70	1.03	2.67	1.05	2.75	1.01
Loss of motivation	3.09	1.12	3.02	1.13	3.27	1.09
Community	2.59	1.12	2.54	1.16	2.69	1.02
Leaving the organization	<b>2.41</b>	.98	<b>2.33</b>	1.00	2.59	.92
Frustration	<b>3.78</b>	.85	<b>3.71</b>	.90	<b>3.96</b>	.73
Insecurity	<b>3.90</b>	.90	<b>3.89</b>	.95	<b>3.93</b>	.80
Scared	3.23	.97	3.19	1.00	3.31	.92
Feel sorrow	2.89	.96	2.81	1.00	3.08	.84
Feel betrayed	<b>2.47</b>	1.01	<b>2.34</b>	1.00	2.76	.93
Feel ashamed	<b>2.41</b>	1.01	<b>2.31</b>	1.00	2.63	.99
Need more information	<b>4.66</b>	.64	<b>4.69</b>	.59	<b>4.59</b>	.73
More informal communication	<b>3.89</b>	.85	<b>3.87</b>	.85	<b>3.94</b>	.88
Spread rumors	3.47	.98	3.43	1.00	3.56	.92
Become silent	2.69	.93	2.61	.93	2.87	.91
Misunderstand the situation	3.04	.96	3.02	.96	3.10	.96

Note: Bold represent low factors, bold and italics represent high factors.

### Which channels of communication have been or will be used for internal crisis communication in your organization?

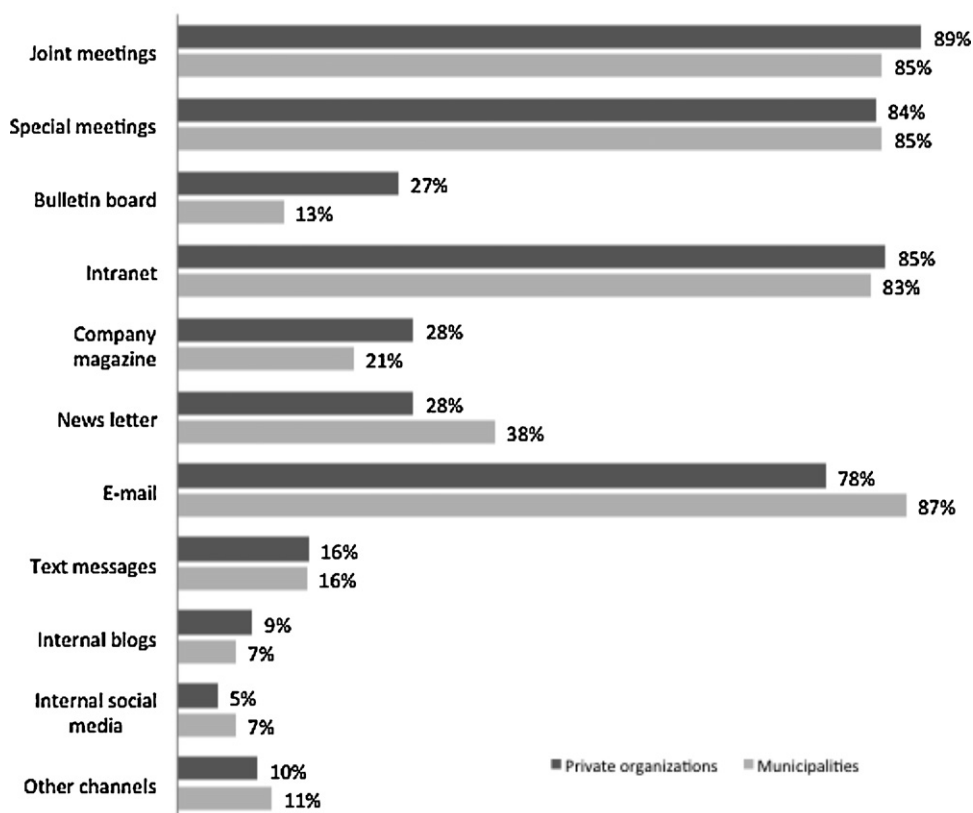


Fig. 1. Internal communication channels.

When exploring the use of communication channels for internal crisis management, we looked at the frequencies reported by managers. As can be seen in Fig. 1, the channels that had been used or were most likely to be used during crisis situations were joint meetings, special meetings, intranet and e-mails.

We also wanted to explore to what extent the managers typically communicate with employees during a crisis. Given that we had a 5-point Likert scale, the level of communication activities between management and employees was generally perceived by the respondents as high: Top-management ( $M = 4.34$ ,  $SD = .82$ ) and mid-level management ( $M = 4.59$ ,  $SD = .61$ ). Furthermore, 74% of the managers (79% of private organizations, 62% of municipalities) were perceived to communicate in order to explain external crisis messages to their employees. When exploring the policies for internal and external communication on the part of employees, we found that 67% (71% of private organizations, 58% of municipalities) had explicit external policies and guidelines for communicating during crisis events, while only 31% of the organizations (34% of private organizations, 25% of municipalities) had similar policies for internal practices.

To the question of whether employees were actively involved as ambassadors for the organization during a crisis, we found that they were involved as external ambassadors in 40% of the organizations (41% of private organizations, 37% of municipalities) and as internal ambassadors in 47% of the organizations (49% of private organizations, 42% of municipalities). Finally, exploring if the employees were initiators of communication during a crisis, 66% of the respondents perceived employees to be communicatively active at the workplace (63% of private organizations, 72% of municipalities), 44% perceived employees to be active at home with the family (45% of private organizations, 42% of municipalities), and 16% indicated that employees used social media such as Facebook to communicate during a crisis (16% of private organizations, 15% of municipalities). However, many respondents answered “Don’t know” to the last two questions.

#### 6.3. Effects of having a crisis management plan on crisis management practices

To understand how organizations managed crisis events we studied the percentage of organizations that had a crisis plan and whether this differed based on type of organization. Our results showed that 88% (73% of private organizations, 90% municipalities) of the organizations in this study currently had a crisis plan. Additionally, 85% of the organizations (88% of private organizations, 77% of municipalities) that had a crisis plan also had components addressing the internal dimensions

of crisis management. In a similar way, 62% of the total sample (61% of private organizations, 62% of municipalities) had a formally appointed person or team for the management of crises in general. Finally, 88% (91% of private organizations, 82% of municipalities) of those who had a crisis team also had a person who was responsible for communication with employees during a crisis event.

Furthermore, we explored the relationship between organizational characteristics and having a crisis plan. Correlation analyses indicated that larger organizations were more likely to have a crisis plan ( $r = .22, p < .01$ ). This was particularly true for private firms ( $r = .21, p < .01$ ). Organizations who had managers with some education in crisis management were also more likely to have a crisis plan (total sample  $r = .20, p < .01$ ; private  $r = .29, p < .01$ ; municipalities  $r = -.09, p > .05$ ). We also explored the relationship between having a crisis plan, and crisis management practices. Correlations tests for these analyses suggest that having a crisis plan was positively related to having person or crisis team in the organization (total sample  $r = .40, p < .01$ ; private  $r = .43, p < .01$ ; municipalities  $r = .33, p < .01$ ). Having a crisis plan was also related to the use of intranet (total sample  $r = .32, p < .01$ ; private  $r = .36, p < .01$ ; municipalities  $r = .23, p < .05$ ) and the use of SMS (total sample  $r = .20, p < .01$ ; private  $r = .21, p < .01$ ; municipalities  $r = .14, p > .05$ ) as internal communication tools for crises events.

To better understand the effects of having a crisis plan in the crisis management process we also studied the relationship between the level of crisis education of the crisis manager and crisis management practices. For this sample our results indicate a difference between private organizations and the municipalities. When exploring only private firms our analyses indicate that the level of education of the crisis manager was positively related to having a crisis plan ( $r = .29, p < .05$ ), having a crisis team ( $r = .29, p < .05$ ), conducting seminars in internal crisis management and crisis communication ( $r = .31, p < .05$ ), conducting crisis simulations or exercises focusing on the internal dimension ( $r = .17, p < .01$ ), establishing a whistleblower arrangement ( $r = .20, p < .01$ ), having formalized procedures for the establishment of a crisis team ( $r = .29, p < .05$ ), appointing an internal spokesperson ( $r = .23, p < .05$ ), having upper and/or middle management undergo communication training ( $r = .29, p < .05$ ), having formal steps to ensure an internal coordination of knowledge during a crisis ( $r = .21, p < .05$ ) as well as actively trying to create a “crisis culture” characterized by openness ( $r = .37, p < .05$ ) and keeping a ‘log book’ for subsequent evaluation of the internal crisis management efforts ( $r = .22, p < .05$ ). Only in the case of “preparing beforehand internal communication channels (e.g. with certain messages)”, we found no relation with having a crisis plan within the private companies. The level of education plays a less important role in the municipalities where the level of crisis education was only positively related to having seminars in internal crisis management and crisis communication ( $r = .37, p < .05$ ), having upper and/or middle management undergo communication training ( $r = .28, p < .05$ ), having formal steps to ensure an internal knowledge sharing during a crisis ( $r = .30, p < .05$ ), and keeping a ‘log book’ ( $r = .32, p < .05$ ).

Finally, we also explored the effects of formally appointing a crisis team/person on the different components of crisis management. In private organizations, having a crisis team was positively related to conducting seminars in internal crisis management and crisis communication ( $r = .28, p < .05$ ), conducting crisis simulations or exercises focusing on the internal dimension ( $r = .35, p < .05$ ), establishing formalized procedures for setting up a crisis team ( $r = .54, p < .05$ ), preparing beforehand internal communication channels ( $r = .23, p < .05$ ), appointing an internal spokesperson ( $r = .39, p < .05$ ), having upper and/or middle management undergo communication training ( $r = .24, p < .05$ ), coordinating organizational knowledge ( $r = .49, p < .05$ ), creating an open “crisis culture” ( $r = .33, p < .05$ ) and having a crisis ‘log book’ ( $r = .33, p < .05$ ). In municipalities, our results showed no relation between having a crisis team/person and crisis management.

#### 6.4. Effects of organizational size on crisis management practices

A second component of this project was to explore the effect of organizational size on the way organizations manage crises. As mentioned earlier, organizational size was positively related to having a management plan ( $r = .22, p < .01$ ), having elements in the plan specifically addressing the internal crisis management ( $r = .18, p < .05$ ), and either having formalized procedures for the establishment of a crisis team ( $r = .26, p < .05$ ) or simply just appointing a person or crisis team responsible for the management of the crisis ( $r = .13, p < .01$ ). Moreover, organizational size mattered in terms of having formal steps to ensure an internal coordination of knowledge during a crisis ( $r = .23, p < .05$ ) as well as actively trying to create a “crisis culture” characterized by openness ( $r = .13, p < .01$ ); but not for conducting crisis simulations or exercises focusing on the internal dimension or preparing beforehand internal communication channels. Looking at private organizations separately, organizational size also mattered when it came to establishing a whistleblower arrangement ( $r = .17, p < .01$ ), appointing an internal spokesperson ( $r = .20, p < .01$ ), and keeping a ‘log book’ for subsequent evaluation of the internal crisis management efforts ( $r = .15, p < .01$ ). As to the municipalities, organizational size also had an influence on having upper and/or middle management undergo communication training to prime them for handling the internal communication during a crisis ( $r = .30, p < .05$ ).

Organizational size also affected the use of departmental meetings (total sample  $r = .14, p < .05$ ; private  $r = .12, p > .05$ ; municipalities  $r = .21, p > .05$ ), intranet (total sample  $r = .22, p < .01$ ; private  $r = .23, p < .01$ ; municipalities  $r = .29, p < .05$ ), company magazine (total sample  $r = .14, p < .05$ ; private  $r = .21, p < .01$ ; municipalities  $r = .08, p > .05$ ), newsletter (total sample  $r = .19, p < .01$ ; private  $r = .23, p < .01$ ; municipalities  $r = .01, p > .05$ ), SMS (total sample  $r = .14, p < .05$ ; private  $r = .23, p < .01$ ; municipalities  $r = -.08, p > .05$ ), blogs (total sample  $r = .17, p < .01$ ; private  $r = .23, p < .01$ ; municipalities  $r = -.09, p > .05$ ) and social media (total sample  $r = .20, p < .01$ ; private  $r = .21, p < .01$ ; municipalities  $r = .20, p > .05$ ) ( $r = .20, p < .01$ ) when managing the internal dimensions of the crisis communication.

### 6.5. Self-evaluation and future needs

When asked to evaluate their own ability to handle a crisis, the respondents (95% of private organizations and 93% of municipalities) were generally content with their performance. Despite this contentment, 52% of the private organizations and 71% of the municipalities saw a need for strengthening the internal crisis management and crisis communication efforts stressing: the need to incorporate the internal crisis management issues in the overall contingency plans (50% of private organizations, 63% of municipalities), the need for better internal coordination between departments and organizational levels (56% of private organizations, 67% of municipalities), the need for competency development in terms of internal crisis management and communication (43% of private organizations, 59% of municipalities), and the need to have a stronger linkage or integration between the external and internal crisis communication (30% of private organizations, 57% of municipalities).

## 7. Discussion

The ICMCC survey has produced a large amount of results concerning the organization internal dimension of crises, crisis management and crisis communication in private companies and municipalities in Denmark. We now know a lot more about this particular field of practice in Danish organizations than we did before. It is our overall impression that many organizations are very active when it comes to optimizing their formal crisis-preparedness. Compared to the situation in 2003 (cf. Frandsen & Johansen, 2004), more organizations today have formulated a crisis management plan, and more organizations have appointed a crisis manager or established a crisis management team. One point of surprise is the many important differences between the crisis management/crisis communication activities of private and public organizations. Municipalities seem to have their own approach to internal crisis management and crisis communication. They define crises in different ways, they have experienced different types of crises, and their employees react to crises in different ways. In the following, we will discuss some of the results presented in the previous section.

Mitroff (2005, pp. 147–149) claims that “every major crisis is experienced as an act of betrayal”, and he distinguishes between seven types of betrayal caused by top management (economic, information, physical, human resources, reputation, psychopathic acts, and natural disasters). However, our results showed that the feeling of betrayal, together with panic, the feeling of shame and leaving the organization, is not perceived as that frequent as a reaction to organizational crises among employees.

As already mentioned in Section 6.1, there is neither a correlation between *organizational size* and the typical reactions to crises among employees, nor a correlation between having a *crisis management plan* and the typical reactions to crises among employees. However, there is a strong correlation between having a *crisis management team/a crisis manager* in the organization and the typical reactions to crises among employees. Organizations that have established a crisis management team or appointed a crisis manager seem to experience loss of motivation and engagement to a lesser extent than organizations without this strategic instrument. Their employees are perceived to be less frustrated, they feel less insecure, and are less afraid in a crisis situation. The employees also do not seem to leave the organization in crisis.

Our results showed that the majority of both private organizations (73%) and municipalities (90%) had a crisis management plan, and of those having a crisis management plan the vast majority contained elements specifically addressing the handling of the internal dimensions of a crisis, indicating a high level of awareness among the respondents of the importance of the handling of a crisis in relation to internal stakeholders. The internal elements of the crisis management plan were less prevalent among the municipalities, where almost every four respondent (23%) indicated the absence of these. In sum, the municipalities seem in general to be better equipped in terms of formal crisis management or contingency plans, however, they appear to have less focus on the internal dimension compared to private organizations. In addition, despite the high prevalence of crisis and contingency plans, in general, our analysis also shows that more than every four private organizations (27%) do not have such a formalized, agreed-upon plan in case of a crisis, indicating that among these organizations, crisis management might be perceived more as an ad hoc assignment, which is dealt with when the crisis occurs.

Almost two out of three of the respondents indicated that they had a formally appointed person or crisis team responsible for managing a crisis, and within the majority of these teams communication with the employees seemed to be given high priority as 91% of the private organizations and 82% of the municipalities, respectively, indicated that they had assigned a team member to be responsible for the internal communication in the event of a crisis. Thus, the results from this group of respondents show a rather professional and formalized behavior towards crisis management in general, but also when it comes to managing a crisis in relation to the internal stakeholders in specific.

Intuitively, one might assume that large organizations would manage crises more professionally due to accumulated knowledge and organizational learning on the basis of previous crisis experiences as well as having a wider range of human resource competencies. Our study confirmed this assumption as the results clearly indicated a strong relation between organizational size and crisis management; the larger the organization the more likely to have a crisis management plan. This particularly pertained to the private organizations.

How has the formal crisis-preparedness developed since 2003? In 2003, the first large national survey of the crisis-preparedness of private companies and public authorities in Denmark was conducted among 750 respondents (Frandsen & Johansen, 2004). The response rate was 40% ( $N = 298$ , private companies:  $N = 160$ , municipalities:  $N = 64$ , and other public authorities:  $N = 74$ ). Although the internal dimension of crisis management and crisis communication only represented a



**Table 2**  
Internal crisis communication channels (2003 and 2011).

	2003 Private (%)	2011 Private (%)	2003 Municipalities (%)	2011 Municipalities (%)
Joint meetings	74	89	71	85
Special meetings	72	84	76	85
E-mails	63	78	68	87
Intranet	61	85	55	83
Employee magazines + newsletters	43	–	24	–
Employee magazines	–	28	–	21
Newsletters	–	28	–	38
Bulletin board	34	27	16	13
Text messages	4	16	6	16
Internal blogs	–	9	–	7
Internal social media	–	5	–	7
Others	4	10	5	11
<b>Sample size</b>	<b>160</b>	<b>166</b>	<b>64</b>	<b>71</b>

minor part of the survey, it included questions concerning the use of internal communication channels in a crisis situation, specific guidelines to employees as well as the role of internal stakeholders.

Comparing the present survey with the 2003 study, some interesting findings can be traced concerning the use of internal communication channels. As it appears from Table 2 above, internal crisis communication generally receives more attention in 2011 than in 2003, and this among both private companies and municipalities. Face-to-face communication (i.e. meetings) is considered a very important channel, and the use of e-mails and intranet have become as important as face-to-face communication. The use of employee magazines and newsletters has increased. Although it continues to be a channel, which is used less frequently and thus can be considered of less importance compared to other channels, the use of text messages has tripled since 2003, whereas the use of bulletin boards has decreased with 20%.

Furthermore, the size of the organizations also plays an important role for the choice of channels: the larger the organization, the less likely it is to use joint meetings, and the more likely is it to use intranet, departmental meetings, employee magazines and newsletters, text messages, internal blogs, and internal social media.

The results from the 2011 survey seem not only to indicate a high focus on top and mid-level management communicating to employees, having internal spokespersons, persons within the crisis teams being responsible for the communication with employees as well as on explaining external messages internally. The results also seem to show an increased focus on what may be communicated externally (guidelines and policies on the part of employees) and on the role of the employees as organizational ambassadors in relation to both internal and external stakeholders (more than 40% of the respondents answered in the affirmative to this question). However, the sample shows that managers primarily are aware of or have knowledge about the employees as initiators of communication in crisis situations, when it comes to communication inside the workplace. With good reason, they are less knowledgeable about crisis communication habits of the employees when it comes to communicating with family at home and/or with friends and relatives through social media such as Facebook.

## 8. Limitations and implications for future research

Despite having generated new knowledge about the internal dimension of organizational crises, crisis management and crisis communication, we are conscious about the fact that our research design has some limitations, and that it only to a certain extent has allowed us to bring answers to our research questions. Organizational crises are complex and varied phenomena, which makes it difficult to generalize across crisis types and types of managers and employees, organizations and industries. However, we claim that the answers produced by the respondents (chief communication officers, human resource managers and/or other managers responsible for the crisis-preparedness of the organization) give a representative picture of how they *perceive* the organization internal dimension of especially the *formal* crisis-preparedness (internal crisis management and crisis communication) of private and public organizations in Denmark. Nevertheless, we would like to emphasize that we have not only conducted the ICMCC survey to be able to generalize across crises and organizations but also to apply a *heuristic procedure*, encouraging ourselves to learn more, that is, using the results of the ICMCC survey to create new hypotheses concerning internal crisis management and crisis communication as an organizational field of practice. Concerning future research, the ICMCC survey will thus be followed by a series of qualitative, semi-structured in-depth interviews with selected respondents making it possible to shed light on the aforementioned hypotheses and contributing to an improved understanding of other aspects of the results of the survey.

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