Crisis Response in Higher Education: Insights from Educational Leaders

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Abstract: Crises can be sudden, disrupt routines of systems, and make significant lasting impact on people's lives and property. Unfortunately, higher education institutions are not immune to crises and how they respond is crucial and critical. This qualitative narrative inquiry study explored how leaders in a higher education institution responded to crises events. Firsthand accounts were gathered through the purposive snowball sampling technique in conjunction with face-to-face semi-structured interviews and field texts. Interviews were conducted with eleven education leaders and external partners. Findings suggest that several factors such as crisis training for leaders, internal and external collaborations and building a crisis management team were important factors that impacts an effective crises response. The findings, insights, and experiences from this study allow for a deeper understanding, help current and future higher educational leaders better understand crises situations and how they can prepare for future issues.

Résumé : Les crises peuvent être soudaines, perturber les routines des systèmes et avoir un impact durable significatif sur la vie et les biens des gens. Malheureusement, les établissements d'enseignement supérieur ne sont pas à l'abri des crises. La façon dont les leaders de ces établissements réagissent est cruciale et critique. Cette étude d'enquête narrative de style qualitative a exploré comment les dirigeants d'un établissement d'enseignement supérieur réagissaient aux événements de crise. Des récits de première main ont été recueillis grâce à la technique d'échantillonnage en boule de neige en conjonction avec des entrevues semi-structurées en face à face et des notes de terrain. Des entrevues ont été menées auprès de onze responsables de l'éducation et de partenaires externes. Les résultats suggèrent que plusieurs facteurs tels que la formation en cas de crise pour les dirigeants, les collaborations internes et externes et la constitution d'une équipe de gestion de crise ont été des facteurs importants qui ont eu une incidence sur une réponse efficace aux crises. Les résultats, les idées et les expériences de cette étude permettent une

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compréhension plus approfondie qui aideront les dirigeants actuels et futurs à mieux comprendre les situations de crise et comment ils peuvent se préparer aux problèmes futurs.

Introduction

Crises have increased steadily over the years, with one of the most recent being the Covid 19 pandemic. This crisis as with all other types of crises has been sudden with many unexpected occurrences such as confusion, lack of preparedness and the dire loss of human lives. In Canada, the message was "go home, stay home" until leaders could figure out the best course of action for the country in handling the pandemic. Universities shut down, classes went online, both instructors and students felt unprepared, and there was a general sense of helplessness and panic (Pokhrel & Chhetri, 2021).

As seen above, a crisis could be anything that threatens an educational institution in terms of lives, reputation, structures, facilities, its everyday operations of knowledge generation and knowledge building. When a crisis occurs, core values or vital systems of a community come under threat such as safety and security, welfare and health, integrity and fairness (Boin, McConnell, & 't Hart, 2010). Regular daily operations are suspended, and the institution goes into crisis management mode.

Crisis in Higher Education

Rosenthal, Charles and 't Hart (1989) warn that crisis produces periods of upheaval and collective stress, disturbing everyday patterns and threatening core values and structures of a social system in unexpected, often unconceivable ways. According to Rook and McManus (2020), higher education institutions are facing unprecedented challenges in the way they teach and research. Crises such as student murders, sexual assaults, suicides, floods, and wildfires are becoming predominant. For example, there have been sexual assault cases in York University in 2017; the University of Ottawa's men's hockey team in 2014; and the University of British Columbia in 2013. The list of crises is endless with each having a negative effect on universities especially if the crisis occurs either on or near the university campus (Myers, 2017).

In this paper, I focus on three crisis events that affected a higher education institution in Canada. Although none of the crises experienced by the higher education institution took place on the campus premises, all three of the crises had major impacts on the institution. In 2013, in a city in western Canada, there was flooding due to heavy rains and a still partially frozen landscape (Davison & Powers, 2013; Nielson, 2015). In the same city, in the early morning hours of April 15, 2014, five young students were stabbed to death at a house party in a quiet neighborhood. The tragedy happened as the victims were celebrating the end of university classes (Geddes, 2015). Finally, wildfire hazard conditions were severe in spring 2016, across western Canada. Within two days the wildfire had grown, and almost 88,000 people were evacuated from the region (Kirchmeier-Young, Zwiers, Gillett & Cannon, 2017).

Responding to crises in higher education can be a delicate and complicated issue, involving several factors that may have an impact on the planning, response, and recovery from each crisis. These factors include reputational issues, providing housing for evacuees, community support, closure and evacuation of the campus, and the constant motion of the campus. These crises situations raise the question of how higher education institutions respond to crises.

Crisis Management Process in Higher Education

Crises are highly disruptive, complex, and dynamic, demanding multifaceted, holistic, strategic, and adaptive response processes aimed at minimizing their social and physical impact (Brennan & Stern, 2017; Rao, Eisenberg & Schmitt, 2007). In order to identify a crisis, a comprehensive assessment of potential vulnerabilities is needed to recognize gaps in preparedness (Standing Partnership, 2017). To do these, institutions must take the initiative to develop crisis management plans that consider possible risks and warning signs, outlining steps to maintain a safe campus (Brennan & Stern, 2017; Coombs, 2007). They must ensure that the crisis management process is timely and adaptable to handle different crisis events (Booker, 2014) while still maintaining a culture of inclusivity and open access. The crisis management plan should be based on the framework of the four phases of emergency management: prevention-mitigation, preparedness, response, and recovery; all

phases being highly interconnected, with each phase influencing the other three phases (Spellings, Price & Modzeleski, 2009).

Part of a crisis management plan is the creation of a crisis management team made up of individuals with different areas of expertise designated to handle any crisis within the organization (Bigley & Roberts, 2001; James & Wooten, 2011; Smith & Dowell, 2000). The team should involve well-trained, inter-departmental personnel from all departments within the organization and the team is activated once a crisis is detected (Brumfield, 2012; Waller, Leiesmt & Pratten, 2014). Successful teams do not happen organically, and leaders must engage in social problem solving (the process by which individuals identify and enact solutions to social life situations), leading to greater productivity, and effective use of resources, as groups combine skills and abilities for decision-making (Burke, Shuffler & Wiese, 2018; Curry, 2014; Gorton & Alston, 2012).

During the selection process of the team, consideration should be given to the relationship between personality and task and members overall cohesion (Smith & Dowell, 2000), in addition to the training of the team members. Crisis management teams should not be trained in an ad hoc manner but through regular meetings and a broad range of simulations. The best teams train together to function as cohesive units in the heat of an actual disaster (Mitroff, Diamond & Alpaslan, 2006).

Crisis Communication

Crisis communication is a vital component of crisis management because a crisis affects all stakeholders — parents, students, faculty, staff, university departments and the public and each stakeholder controls hundreds of independent communication sources. Thus, crisis communication then becomes a systemic web of responsibilities that flows outward into the community and inward through the university departments (Moerschell & Novak, 2019). It is a dialog among an organization, the public, government leaders, and internal and external stakeholders within the organization, prior to, during, and after a crisis (Fearn-Banks, 2016).

Educational leaders need to become familiar with, study, and understand crisis communication and its impact on stakeholders (Gigliotti, 2017; Lawson, 2007; Ulmer et al., 2007). When a crisis occurs, public appetite for information grows exponentially, as both the affected and unaffected populations watch the crisis unfold on

television, read about events in the newspaper, or track developments online (Miller & Goidel 2009; Ulmer et al., 2015). In fact, people affected by crisis need information about relief efforts, the scale of destruction, any lingering risks, and explanations for events and how quick response will be.

The media, both social and traditional, are prominent players who make substantial impact during a crisis and must be targets of communications as swiftly as possible (Fearn-Banks, 2016; Ulmer et al., 2015). Communication should begin in the "golden hour," the first hour following notification that a crisis has occurred (Fearn-Banks, 2016). The role of the media will be to disseminate information about the crisis and "frame" the crisis for viewers, listeners, or readers (Garnett & Kouzmin, 2000). Effective crisis communications not only can improve the outcomes after a crisis but can also bring the organization a more positive reputation. Therefore, higher educational institutions need to understand how to effectively communicate, take advantage of the different social and traditional media to communicate strategically with both internal stakeholders and the public. They can use these tools to be present, be where the action is, be there before the action and be polite (Coombs, 2015).

Reputational Risk in Higher Education

Higher education institutions face challenges not unlike a small city (Open Access Government, 2020). This means that they may be liable to all the risks found in a city, one of such risks is reputational, especially during a crisis. Reputational risk is top for higher education institutions due to its increasing likelihood, quickness to spread, and the high impact it can have on an institution (ERM Initiative Faculty & Baker, 2019).

Reputation is a major driver of value for higher education institutions, therefore, anything that paints an institution's reputation in a bad light is a ding in that asset (Beasley, 2013). An institution's reputation requires careful and constant protection (Porter, 2013). Unfortunately, in a crisis, the constant protection of an institution's reputation may not always occur. To successfully manage their reputational risks during a crisis, higher education institutions are encouraged to build their governance and culture to set the tone, engage leaders in risk management, enforce accountability, and demonstrate desired behaviors surrounding reputational risk (Abraham & Walker, 2013).

Methodology

The aim of the study is to examine how higher education leaders responded to human-made and natural crises. Human-made crisis in this context, is defined as life-threatening events that are caused by human beings. The study was addressed by using a qualitative narrative inquiry methodology. The university that formed the context for this study is a public research postsecondary institution in western Canada with a student population of 31,950 (at the time of this study). Purposeful and snowball sampling were used in conjunction with face-to-face semi-structured interviews. Purposeful sampling involves identifying and selecting individuals that are knowledgeable about or experienced with a phenomenon of interest (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011), while snowballing is a technique that helps to identify participants that may be hidden or hard to reach (Atkinson & Flint, 2001).

Research Question

How did senior leaders in a large western Canadian higher education institution respond to crises?

Research Design

Qualitative research seeks to explore, explain, and describe a central phenomenon (Creswell, 2015) and it is naturalistic and interpretive in its approach. Additionally, a narrative inquiry methodology allows for a deep, holistic, rich, and detailed understanding of the lived experiences of higher education leaders' response to crises (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Fraser, 2004). In the context of this study, the use of narratives provided an opportunity to describe, using thick rich descriptions (the process of paying attention to contextual detail), the lived experiences of higher education crises leaders.

The participants are eight senior leaders in a higher education institution: one provost/vice president academic, one vice provost, one associate vice president, five vice presidents handling different portfolios and a senior member of the emergency operations group, in addition, an elementary school vice-principal and a senior leader of the city's emergency management agency. These groups of people were involved in the evacuation, emergency response, media, and communication in a city in western Canada. The elementary school vice-principal and the senior leader in the city's emergency management agency were included as research participants because of the collaborations and partnerships with the educational

institution studied in responding to all three crises of the flood, wildfires, and student murders. The rationale for selecting these leaders was based on their role as key stakeholders in decision making, experts in their respective professional fields and prior experiences in disaster response.

Ethics approval was obtained from the Institutional Review Board (IRB). Participants signed an informed consent form prior to the beginning of each interview, these forms contained information on steps to safeguard their privacy, and confidentiality, the purpose, and design of the research study. Pseudonyms were used instead of participants real names.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data collection was in the form of semi-structured interviews lasting an average of one hour and 20 minutes and field notes of shared experiences. All interviews were audio-taped and transcribed, and participants were given the opportunity to review for accuracy, give feedback and make edits in the transcribed data. Subsequently, the transcribed data was analysed using narrative analysis. Narrative analysis involved coding the interview questions into clusters of similar categories by identifying consistent patterns and relationships that resulted in themes (Reissman, 2018). The identification of themes provides the complexity of a story (Creswell, 2015), and added depth to the insight about understanding the phenomena.

Findings and Discussion

Responding to crises in higher education can be a delicate and complicated issue, involving several factors that may have an affect on the planning, response, and recovery from each crisis. These factors include reputational issues, providing housing for evacuees, community support, closure and evacuation of the campus, and the constant motion of the campus. It is important to note that none of the crises experienced by the higher education institution studied took place on the campus premises; however, all three crises (a flood, student murders, and a major wildfire) had major impacts on the institution. The themes from the responses are discussed below.

The University's Role in Responding to the Three Crises

The educational leaders were asked about their initial reactions and responses to the three types of crises encountered by the university, especially, in an institution that had no previous experience in handling crisis on such a large scale. The responses from these educational leaders included feeling: *overwhelmed, horrified, alarmed, sad, terrible, care and concern for individuals involved in the crisis, helpless, and inadequate.*

According to one participant, Pauline,

> I was horrified, I heard about it in the news, I could not believe that several students had been murdered. Your heart just went out to the families, and you felt helpless, because you cannot comfort, there is no comfort and you know, you certainly do not want to say or do anything that might be viewed as insensitive and it is so hard to try and figure out, we are just so inadequate.

The participant described these reactions in response to the magnitude of the loss of human lives in one of the crises.

The Crises of the Flood and Wildfire

The crisis of the flood was a citywide crisis that had a large and unexpected impact on the institution. Responses from interviewees revealed that the institution was taken by surprise by the flood and was not prepared for the impact that occurred in terms of closing the campus and housing evacuees.

According to one participant, Martha,

> We made the decision to close the campus during the floods. We had some operational issues that we have never dealt with before, in terms of who was still allowed to be on campus…it was everything from having to inform researchers that they can't come into campus, if they've got experiments running, how they were going to manage those, how we were going to manage our animals, feeding, and cage cleaning and all those kinds of things.

Closing the campus impacted and highlighted the operational deficits the university had, and it was a big learning curve for all involved. These operational deficits included managing experiments on campus, internal communications with researchers, faculty, and students, asking them not to come into school, explanations of why the campus was closing, the cancellation of exams and events held on campus, a lack of a tracking system for events happening on campus and managing the crisis over the phone rather than in person because leaders could not come into work. The participants were united in suggesting that the institution was not adequately prepared for this crisis. There was chaos. One participant, Cynthia explained.

> The flood highlighted some of the deficits in our processes, I will [tell] you one example… we had different systems for booking space on campus, we had one for booking classrooms, one for conference and events, faculties had their own…so we needed to know who had events on campus, there was a couple of conferences, as an institution we did not know the full extent of who was on campus.

Trepidation, uncertainty, confusion, a lack of preparedness, and operational deficits were experienced by the institution at the onset of the crises. The operational deficits highlighted the importance of preparing a well thought out crisis management plan, actions that are the results of the plan, critical decisions in the areas of logistics, strategy, and communication, to determine the university's response. These processes can prevent the crisis from overwhelming the institution.

The Murders of Several University Students

Violent behavior often occurs in unexpected places and under hard-to-predict circumstances (Jenson, 2007). Such was the case when several university students were murdered in a residential area off campus grounds; the impact was deeply emotional, and the consequences devastating and long-lasting to the institution and the larger community. Participants in the study reported feeling: *a sense of disbelief, shock, a sense of immense sadness, horror, and feelings of helplessness*. Information collected indicated clearly that in navigating the wake of the murders, educational leaders engaged in dealing with the crisis by putting their emotions aside. They

described trying to piece together information and going through the process of sense making about what had taken place.

In the first few hours following the crisis, communication took place among emergency services, the police, and the institution leaders. Leaders on campus endeavored to *"quickly move into a response to the situation" (Andy)*. Sheryl talks about this crisis:

> This was a tough one …you really should be working so closely with the …police and with the families of the victims. ...You have to be sensitive and so much of what you do in terms of communication is governed by both the police investigation and by the wishes of the families and those two things are just so paramount…We felt it was so important to very …quickly bring our campus community together, the mayor came to speak, the president spoke, and it was such a difficult day [that followed the murders] …how sensitively it had to be handled.

Crisis response and decisions were driven by a sense of sensitivity, care, and concern for the families, students, and broader community. The focus of the institution, according to the participants in this study, was connecting with the families of the institutions' students first and foremost, providing support for the community who knew the victims and supporting the broader community. The president of the institution spoke at a police news media broadcast to bring some level of comfort and consolation to the families and the public. In addition, the institution was being socially responsive to the mental well-being and wellness of the faculty, students, and staff of the university. Chaplains and a team of counselors were brought in to provide faculty, staff, and students with the required emotional support, especially for students who were experiencing survivor guilt.[i] Further responses included visiting the families of the victims and attending the funerals for the murdered students. In addition, a vigil was held on the same day of the murders at the university and a year later a memorial service was held for the victims. This crisis was a difficult one to handle because it was emotionally intense and involved the tragic loss of young lives.

Additionally, this crisis brought up the importance of mental health and well-being for students, faculty, and staff. Giggie (2015) encourages campuses to create procedures to address mental health concerns and have a comprehensive and coordinated mental health

service. Information gleaned from the interviews reveals that the university was in the process of assessing its mental health needs and services just before the murders of the students. This crisis led the university to strengthen its mental health strategy by creating and implementing several programs targeted at mental health and wellness of students, faculty, and staff.

Crisis Teams' Composition, Roles, Responsibilities, and Impact

Responses from educational leaders in the institution studied indicated that there was a crisis management team. Esther, a participant, outlined the distinct structure for handling crisis, highlighting the important fact of creating a crisis management team.

> We have a well-defined crises management structure …an emergency operations group is operational level, which includes the planning [and] the logistics. The communications group, which is the group that gets us all the information that we need to make decisions. ...The crises management team …is at the strategic level of decision making and works to protect the reputation of the university during a crisis.

According to another participant, Jane Smith:

> I would say the great thing about our crisis management team …is [that] everyone has an equal role outside of the leader and the expectation in that room is that everyone brings their experience and their thoughts to bear at the table.

Another participant, Martha gave a detailed breakdown of the activation procedures for crisis management on campus:

> Most of our incidents on campus are really attended to by our first responders [FRs], that would include campus security …When it gets bigger and I call it when we get the lights and sirens, …[the] fire department, …police, [health] services, emergency medical service folks, we have …to activate our second level, which is called the Emergency Operations Group…Our CMT [crisis

> management team] …is generally activated when the EOG [emergency operations group] is activated.

Responses from the educational leaders indicate that the institution had a defined structure for handling crisis, and each structure was tasked with different responsibilities and different activation times, depending on the crisis. Included in this structure, was a CMT, an EOG, and FRs which are made up of campus security, emergency wardens and emergency responders. These different teams provided the institution with an access to a wide source of expertise and human resources, and led to the delegation of specific responsibilities by each team lead during a crisis.

The difference amongst these three teams was in responsibilities and duties. The CMT managed strategy and policy with regards to crises from an institutional, financial, operational, and reputational lens, with the overarching responsibility of guiding the institution through any crisis. The EOG was the functional and tactical group activated for emergencies, and act as a support to the crisis management team. The FRs attend to most of the small crisis incidents and were front level responders.

In terms of the composition of these individual teams, responses suggest that the makeup of each team was not necessarily based on their expertise in crisis management but based on their expertise, familiarity, and experiences in their different portfolios. The influence and leadership in these teams were dynamic, and fluid and often reciprocal as team members took on the tasks for which they were most suited or motivated to accomplish.

Collaborations/Partnerships During Crisis Response

Responses from educational leaders reveal that there are two types of collaborations that happen during major crises (a) external collaborations with external partners; and (b) internal collaborations with faculty, staff, and students. Internal collaborations are the partnerships that happen among different faculties and units such as residence services within a university to manage a crisis.

External Collaborations

When a society is affected by a large disaster, the range of various needs will activate numerous actors requiring diverse organizations

and individuals to collaborate effectively and quickly (Anderson, 2018; Uhr, 2017). Across the interviews, educational leaders indicated that the institution had good collaborations with emergency organizations and other higher educational institutions during crises, and that these relationships continue beyond the crises. Statements like "it was amazing"; "there's tremendous collaboration between the emergency services and the institution"; and "the fires would be a great example of collaboration with the postsecondary institutions" echoed across the responses by participants.

Internal Collaborations

Information gleaned from the study reveals that there are internal collaborations between the different units and faculties in the institution in coordinating operations and resources for crisis management. The university worked together as a whole and not as isolated units, as one participant pointed out, "you cannot do emergency management in a corner." Several faculties worked in partnerships to help manage the crisis, including the faculties of veterinary medicine, nursing, medicine, kinesiology, and social work. For example, the faculty of veterinary medicine set up a clinic in the dining center to provide vaccinations and food for the pets that were brought into residence. Uhr (2017) notes that during crisis response various resources do not only work as parallel organizations, but as a whole, leading to efficient direction and coordination.

Despite the collaborations, there were still conflicts. Conflicts experienced were centered on the decision-making, coordination, understanding the types of resources required and prompt communication with all departments. Additionally, external emergency agents were inexperienced, and there were no processes and procedures by these emergency agencies for two of the situations (the fire and the flood) under investigation in this article.

According to Martha, a participant,

> What happened in the fires is that [the emergency agency] just don't have that same experience and they don't have the same procedures and so as you may have heard it became a bit of a nightmare, in terms of managing.

As seen above, collaborations during crises is not always smooth and free from frictions. These frictions can cause conflicts and increase tensions and uncertainties in managing a crisis.

Crisis Communication and a University's Reputation

University stakeholders include faculty, staff, administrators, and students, their families, the wider community, and the media (Moerschell & Novak, 2019). Therefore, effective crisis communication is valuable to enhance preparedness and response, as well as raise the level of awareness of all stakeholders and their capacity to take appropriate measures (Wendling, Radisch & Jacobzone, 2013). John, one of the participants in my study, reports that "everything depends on communication, especially in a crisis." My observations from the interviews suggest that crisis communications were a significant part of response of the institution. Although the educational institution endeavoured to send quick communication to stakeholders, it was not without its own issues, as one participant noted, "we had some challenges initially with communication, even with our own teams." He further explained,

> [We] were talking to the emergency services and the emergency operations center for the [city] and they couldn't even talk to the police. The emergency operations center couldn't understand what was going on, so a lot of [communication challenges] was around that part with the external agencies.

Another participant discussed the importance of having the right communication and the right messages, and the right communications person in the room. Ulmer, Sellnow and Seeger (2015) point out this same issue in their research, explaining that organizations are often communicating with groups they are not familiar with, and this lack of familiarity exists due to a lack of prior relationships with these stakeholders.

Another major concern expressed by leaders I interviewed was putting out the wrong type of information that could cause harm, especially in situations that involves the loss of life. One participant explained:

> We need to have more information, the cleaner the quicker, sometimes in this day and age of instantaneous knowledge the last thing you want to be accused of is putting out information that's wrong or could put people at harm.

It is important for leaders to be concerned about the care, and safety of all stakeholders and to ensure that the right kind of official information is sent out. However, a delay in dissemination of the right information may lead to rumours and the wrong information received by stakeholders, which can exacerbate the situation. The importance of timely distribution of the right and accurate knowledge cannot be underestimated.

Additional significant information gleaned in this study was how closely linked the university's reputation was to crisis response. In research conducted by Caleys, Cauberghe and Vyncke (2010) their findings suggest a relationship between crisis response and organizational reputation, indicating that the more severe people perceive a crisis to be, the more negative the perceptions of the organization's reputation. Indeed, crises that are not well managed will hurt the reputation of a university, affecting student enrollment and creating a downturn in student applications across the entire institution (Coombs, 2007; Varma, 2009; Whitfield, 2003). All leaders interviewed had an awareness and concern about the university's reputation, because all three crises experienced posed great reputational risk.

Despite this concern, "doing the right thing" in the crisis was of utmost importance to the leaders interviewed. Pauline explains,

> I think if your focus is on what really matters, is on your values, then whatever comes, comes. Your reputation will be intact if you focus on your values, if you focus on your reputation that's the wrong approach, you have to focus on your values and doing the right thing.

Creating the right value systems of support, care, concern, and being humane before a crisis occurs can keep an institution focused not on its reputation but primarily on its people. Gigliotti (2020) emphasize that it is essential for leaders to rely on their shared values and principles as a guide, an anchor, and a source of stability during a crisis. Therefore, people focused values of care, concern, "compassion, clarity, and a commitment to the wellbeing" (Gigliotti, 2020, p. 3) of the university community can help a university gain

reputation rather than lose it and is crucial during the turmoil of a crisis.

Crisis Training

Organizations use different types of training to improve crisis leadership skills and develop resilience against crisis events (Muffet-Willett, 2013). These types of training provide opportunities for educational leaders to be emerged in real world tasks and issues (Yukl, 2006). Crisis training can be formal and informal and can take place periodically. Participants in the study explained that the crisis training they received enabled practice and learning and gave them opportunities to make mistakes, that otherwise may have been costly in a real crisis. Participants explained that the benefits of training included opportunities to ask questions, and not be afraid to make mistakes, build collaborative relationships, and offered a way to get to know each other's capabilities. Furthermore, participants revealed that after experiencing a previous crisis, and when faced with a similar crisis, their sense of preparedness and confidence levels had increased. Training for crisis included formal and informal training sessions.

Formal training sessions included walking through crisis checklists, seminars, workshops, and tabletop exercises —*"an informal, discussion-based session in which a team discusses their roles and responses during an emergency, walking through one or more example scenarios"* (Fruhlinger, 2021, p. 1). Additionally, guest speakers from other higher educational institutions that had experienced crises, as well as emergency management agencies, were invited to talk about their crisis response experiences. One participant interviewed, believed that having guest speakers speak about their experiences provided a more in-depth context. In her words, *"I'll tell you, when you sit with people who'd been through real crises, you see their emotions come out and what it was for them, then you feel like you were there."*

Another participant explained that "tabletop exercises were [in] fact situations that created opportunities for learning, giving participants a sense of what questions to ask, and the ability to build a real good team environment." As Boin, Kofman-Bos and Overdijk (2004) explain, a good simulation generates the necessary awareness that crisis can occur, and the required motivation to assess the crisis. Furthermore, when participants realize the nature and the potential of threats, they may become keen to discuss and to learn from others.

Informal training sessions included live stimulated crisis scenarios. Crisis simulations offer a near-perfect opportunity to get acquainted with all aspects of crisis management and the unique experience of "sitting in the hot seat"—an experience that can otherwise only be gained by managing a real-life crisis (Flin, 1996, p. 231). This experience of *"sitting in the hot seat"* was described by one of the participants as *"you feel like you are there [in the crisis], because adrenaline is different, emotions are different, and response is different."* These types of informal training sessions enable leaders to experience a "crisis" without the pressure of the real crisis.

A key challenge about crisis training gathered from the interviews was crisis training fatigue. Crisis training fatigue is the exhaustion and burnout experienced from having several crisis training circles and simulations, in addition to responding to a real crisis. A number of participants reported feeling the fatigue and burnout of constant training.

Implications and Conclusion

Managing a crisis is a delicate and sensitive issue as there are many unanticipated and unexpected circumstances (Ovie, 2020). In the educational institution studied, the flood, which was the first major crisis, highlighted the deficiencies the university had and its lack of preparedness for the size, magnitude, and its effect on the campus. The challenges faced included the university's unpreparedness to host evacuees, the consequences of closing the university, the lack of crisis management continuity plans for each department, issues with internal communications, and collaborations with external emergency agencies. Despite these challenges, educational leaders who were interviewed chose to have an attitude of turning the challenges faced into moments of learnings, and opportunities to make strategic changes. This attitude revealed a humbleness, a willingness to learn and the forward-facing posture of the institution – the ability to become more intentional in all aspects of crisis response to preserve lives and property.

Creating continuity plans (the critical information an organization needs to continue operating during a crisis) for each department, developing better processes for communication, and asking the right type of questions from emergency agencies as to what kinds of supports are required, are key components of crisis response and if neglected, then could cause more chaos. An understanding of the right questions to ask can save lives and can

reduce the extent of damage. Doing the above, allows an institution to be proactive, to set clear operational accountability, leadership, and coordination for effective crisis response.

Equally important is crisis communication. Everything depends on communication in a crisis. Communication that is effective, timely, and with accurate information should be disseminated, especially when lives are involved. When timely and accurate information is disseminated, stakeholders can be better informed about decisions taken by an institution, creating a culture of trust, care, concern, and encouragement (Ovie, 2020). Doing this may reduce the amount of fake information, speculations, and rumours, which tend to exacerbate a crisis. Also, the importance of having the right information is necessary for logistics purposes for evacuations of victims, collaborations with internal and external agencies and efficient and effective response. Timely and accurate communication can create the right value systems of safety and support for all stakeholders to help reduce their anxiety and confusion.

Evidence shows that crisis response becomes more complicated without the right crisis response team. This team should be made up of highly skilled experts with different portfolios performing interdependent and highly consequential tasks with "valuable leadership, knowledge and expertise in all major areas of the university" (Magay, 2020, para. 10). The university studied had a crisis team with each member addressing a structural or environmental challenge. However, there were setbacks to this structure such as the collaborative nature of teams leading to slow decision making, lack of prompt communications, leadership continuity if a team member was absent or sick, and the ability to timely capture and update crisis management processes in an emergency response manual. In addressing the issue of leadership continuity, creating a rotation of multiple teams as backup and cross-training may ensure leadership continuity. In addition, leaders could endeavour to create an atmosphere of openness to encourage deep and meaningful conversations across all teams on emergency work.

Furthermore, Gallagher (2002) suggested that crisis management plans should be considered as living documents and updated continually. Therefore, it is important to create real time schedules to update and to review emergence response manuals. The review or update of the emergency response manual could be done individually by members of the crisis management team or as

a group to ensure that all updates are captured in a database. These real time schedules could be annually or twice a year depending on how often crisis response occurs. An updated emergency response manual could be a useful tool in onboarding new crisis leaders.

Likewise, higher education institutions can develop and build intentional collaborative relationships with external emergency services, and K-12 schools to allow for mutual sharing of resources to augment each other during emergency operations. These intentional collaborative relationships can lead to an atmosphere of openness and trust leading to rich and generative discussions. Muffet-Willett (2010) and Schrage (1990) noted that with each rich generative discussion, solutions can be shared, and decisions and actions can be taken in an atmosphere of trust, coordination, and cooperation fostered for mutual benefit. In such an atmosphere, educational institutions act as leaders in creating value, and connections with the community, leading to strong partnerships (Ovie, 2020), and a gain in reputation.

Equally significant are the values and principles an institution reflects during crisis response. Effective crisis response should be in a manner that reflects and reinforces the mission and core values of an institution with an understanding and knowledge of its values, and a response that boldly emphasizes those essential principles (Gigliotti, 2020). A response solely focused on preserving and protecting one's reputation would be catastrophic, short-sighted, and problematic (Gigliotti, 2020).

Unfortunately, crisis researchers predict that leaders will be faced with an increasing number of different types of crises in the future (Mitroff, 2005; Mitroff & Anagnos, 2001). The quality of crisis response, training, communication, and collaboration in any educational institution will have a lasting impact on the institution's reputation, health and well-being of the entire community. It is therefore important to sustain leadership knowledge and practice for crisis response preparedness.

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[i] Survivor guilt refers to guilt at having survived when others who seem to be equally, if not more, deserving did not.

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