CHAPTER 30

Embedding Issue Management

From Process to Policy

Tony Jaques

Issue management is not about how to manage an issue, but how to manage because of an issue.

When issue management[1] was becoming established in the late 1970s and early 1980s, its founders explicitly envisaged a discipline which would enable corporations and business associations to proactively deal with issues which affect them, rather than merely reacting to such issues.

Over the subsequent decades, issue management evolved beyond the corporate sector and attracted a great deal of attention from practitioners and academics, some of whom introduced complex work processes and mathematical modeling intended to promote a structural framework for the discipline and to help carve out a unique role, language, and identity.

But the past few years have seen renewed focus on issue management both as a core suite of proven tools and processes and also as a critical element embedded within the broader continuum of management practice. Reviewing this evolution helps reinforce the important contribution of issue management and its emerging positioning as part of an integrated response to organizational and societal risks, threats, and challenges.

The Beginning of Issue Management

Of all the disciplines in public relations, issue management is the only one whose formal birth can be traced to an exact time and place. The occasion was 15 April, 1976, when public relations pioneer Howard Chase (1910–2003) released the inaugural issue of his new publication *Corporate*

Public Issues and Their Management, which formally introduced for the first time the term *issue management* (Chase, 1976).

During the 1970s, Chase and a number of colleagues became increasingly concerned about the lack of corporate capacity to respond to the growing influence of activist and other nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) in the development of public policy. Accordingly, they promoted issue management as a business discipline explicitly designed to enable corporations to participate in, and not simply respond to, public policy issues which have the potential to affect the organization. Chase (1980) himself described it as "a methodology by which the private sector can get out of the unenviable position of being at the end of the crack-the-whip political line" (p. 5).

More specifically, Chase (1982) described issue management as "the capacity to understand, mobilize, coordinate and direct all strategic and policy planning functions, and all public affairs/public relations skills, toward achievement of one objective; meaningful participation in creation of public policy that affects personal and organizational destiny" (p. 1).

There have been many attempts to refine and restate the definition of issue management (including Crable & Vibbert, 1986; Heath & Cousino, 1990; Heugens, 2005; Wartick & Mahon, 1994). Indeed, Heath (1997) observed that no definition of issue management had yet achieved consensus, and nothing since has altered that judgment.

A key reason for this continuing absence of consensus is the evolution of issue management itself and its application. Instead of still being just a mechanism to allow the corporate sector to participate in the formation of public policy, issue management is now also used by government agencies themselves to promote and implement new policy, and by NGOs, activists, and community groups to facilitate public participation in the process. As a result of this migration, the nature and application of issue management has changed substantially (for discussion of this evolution, see Jaques, 2009b).

Meanwhile, the fundamental definition of issue management evolved from a focus mainly on public policy toward an increasing focus on internal processes, with a strong emphasis on the basic nature of issue management itself—that is, a formal process to identify and prioritize issues early, to mobilize resources across the organization, and to develop and implement practical plans in order to achieve planned, positive outcomes. In addition to a focus on tools and processes, issue management also began to resume its original strategic intent, with a growing emphasis on the essential links between issue management and strategic planning (see Jaques, 2009a).

What Is an Issue?

In his groundbreaking book *Issue Management: Origins of the Future*, Chase (1984) defined an issue as "an unsettled matter which is ready for decision" (p. 38). But it is clear that this definition was neither sufficiently specific nor sufficiently distinguished from everyday organizational problems. Since then, three distinct approaches emerged to define the nature of an issue, and each of these approaches is still in use.

As long ago as 1994, Wartick and Mahon reviewed the literature and identified three distinct definitional issue constructs: (1) the controversy theme, (2) the expectational gaps theme, and (3) the impact theme. For the discussion which follows, the author prefers to substitute the description disputation theme for the controversy theme, because the word *controversy* can itself be perceived as a loaded term (Jaques, 2009b).

The Disputation Theme

Following the lead provided by the 1984 Chase definition, a number of scholars and commentators introduced other descriptions developing the disputation theme. A typical early example of this approach is Crable and Vibbert (1986): "An issue occurs when a problem becomes focused in a particular question that calls for

dispute and some sort of resolution" (p. 62). Other scholars substituted alternative qualifiers such as "a public dispute in which the public interest is unclear" (Stanley, 1985, p. 18) or a dispute which "leads to confrontations and political battles" (Lerbinger, 1997, p. 318).

Unfortunately, the disputation approach can become very general and rather passive. This limitation is exemplified in a more recent presentation of the disputation theme from Heath and Coombs (2006): "An issue is a contestable difference of opinion, a matter of fact, evaluation or policy that is important to the parties concerned" (p. 262).

Yet the disputation theme is useful because it emphasizes that an issue requires, by definition, a dispute between two or more parties. If the matter under discussion is so self-evident that there are no contending opinions, then no issue exists. The principal limitation of this theme is that many disputes or "unsettled matters" exist in society which would not be classified as issues in the sense of requiring the full application of formal issue management. In other words, although every legitimate issue involves matters of dispute, not every dispute constitutes an issue.

The Expectation Gap Theme

The concept of an issue being a gap in expectation was also developed very early and came to be defined as a gap between the actions of the organization concerned and the expectations of its stakeholders (Issue Management Council, n.d.; Regester & Larkin, 2002).

This theme has the merit of simplicity, and it also has strong support among the activist/NGO community, particularly in the field of corporate social responsibility (CSR), where there is a clear focus on corporate performance versus stakeholder expectation. However, the gap theme is losing favor among scholars because the concept of an expectation gap is too general, lacks sufficient specificity, and is very subjective. And like the disputation theme, it too can be a very passive concept. A gap in stakeholder expectation can certainly *lead* to an issue, especially if the gap and/or the stakeholder is of sufficient importance. Furthermore, analysis of the gap can help *characterize* an issue. But it is difficult to argue that the gap itself constitutes an issue as such.

The Impact Theme

The third approach, the impact theme, was typified very early in work by the Conference Board, a not-for-profit international business research organization based in New York, which introduced what it called "impact taxonomy." The Board's adopted definition was as follows: "An issue is a condition or pressure, either internal or external to an organization that, if it continues, will have a significant effect on the functioning of the organization or its future interests" (Brown, 1979, p. 1).

The impact theme has subsequently been much adapted and modified in a variety of forms. One of the most recent and effective restatements is by Regester and Larkin (2002): "An issue is a condition or event, either internal or external to the organization which, if it continues, will have a significant effect on the functioning or performance of the organization or on its future interests" (p. 42).

It can be argued that this impact approach is less applicable to community/NGO groups, which sometimes elect to participate in an issue which they feel affects society as a whole rather than affecting their particular organization. However, it has some very strong merits which make it a leading working definition.

The first of these merits is that the impact theme emphasizes the dynamic nature of an issue. Unlike the passivity of the other two approaches, which focus on an existing dispute or gap, the impact theme highlights the continuous nature of the issue as a moving and developing risk. Moreover, its future focus on potential effect rather than just a present problem emphasizes the importance of intervention, which is very much aligned with a generally more proactive modern response.

Perhaps most important is that the impact definition also provides a very clear statement

that the focus is, and must be, on what is *significant*. While organizations face problems every day, of varying nature and importance, the great strength of the impact theme in issue definition is its emphasis that issue management is not a general-purpose problem-solving tool, applied to every dispute or gap in expectation, but is most appropriately employed when the impact is, or is likely to be, significant.

Beyond this focus on definitions, there is real value in a better understanding of the nature of issues, or more precisely the quality of issues, as this helps distinguish between different types of problems and issues and helps counter the careless use of the word issue.

Some managers describe every challenge they face as an "issue," be it market share, staff retention, competitive pricing, timing a product launch, or getting a new publication out on schedule. However, Jaques (2007b) said that situations properly defined as issues, and which warrant mobilization of formal issue management processes, are normally those

- which involve external parties,
- for which there is no black-and-white answer,
- which may involve public policy or regulation,
- where emotions rather than data often prevail,
- which happen in public or in the news media, and
- where the risks of failure are greatest and, if left unmanaged, have the potential to become crises and threaten the entire organization.

The Development of Process Models

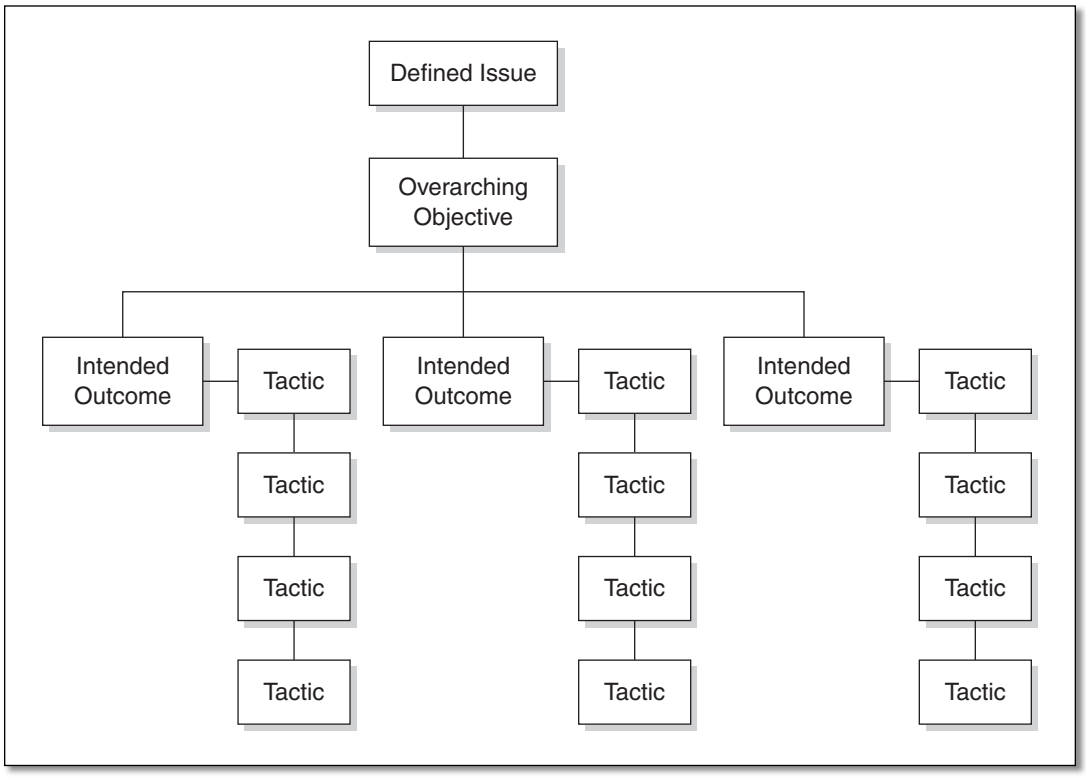
From the earliest days of issue management, there was a strong emphasis on charts and diagrams to illustrate the process. Shortly after first launching the "new science" of issue management, Chase and his colleague Barrie Jones published the first formal issue management process diagram (Chase & Jones, 1977), which reinforced the foundation on which the structure was built.

The Chase-Jones model comprised five basic steps—issue identification, issue analysis, issue change strategy options, issue action program, and evaluation of results—and is still regarded as "the most influential issue management model" (Coombs & Holladay, 2007, p. 81).

At the same time Chase and Jones also published a "wall chart" which expanded on their five-stage model and depicted 88 distinct steps presented as a series of concentric circles within each stage.[2] While the wall chart has fallen out of use, mainly because it was too complicated, the simple five-step Chase-Jones model provided the blueprint for most other graphic representations of key processes. In fact, Ewing (1997) asserted that "all issue management models published by others since 1997 are variations on this model" (p. 174). Yet the effective demise of the multielement Chase-Jones "wall chart" provides another important lesson for today, at a time when modern computer graphic programs make it all too easy to produce highly complex models and flow charts. Process models are important in both the operation and communication of issue management and are now accepted as essential to issue management best practice (Jaques, 2005). But the models need to be simple, logical, and intuitive.

One such simplified model is the Do-it Plan© (Jaques, 2000a, 2000b) (Figure 30.1). The four steps of this model, which spell out its name, are (1) definition (defining the issue in a single, structured sentence), (2) objective (agreeing on a single, overarching objective), (3) intended outcomes (manageable subobjectives), and (4) tactics (specific name-bound, time-bound actions to deliver each outcome).

Figure 30.1 **The Do-It Plan©**



Source: Jaques (2000a, p. 15).

The Issue Life Cycle

The other key area where models have been widely used in issue management relates to graphic presentations of the issue life cycle, sometimes known as the issue attention cycle. An early example of such a model is seen in the work of Meng (1992), who characterized issues moving over time through five phases of a life cycle—potential, emerging, current, crisis, and dormant—and moving at the same time through parallel phases of ability to influence or affectability—origin, mediation/amplification, organization, and resolution.

There are other models using alternative descriptions for the progressive stages, such as societal expectation, political developments, legislation, and regulation/litigation. Or yet again emerging issues, politicization, legislation/mandated requirements, and litigation (for detailed discussion of issue life cycles, see Bigelow, Fahey, & Mahon, 1993; González-Herrero & Pratt, 1996; Jaques, 2000a, 2000b; Mahon & Waddock, 1992; Zyglidopoulos, 2003).

The different terminology in various models is less important than the two common concepts which run through them all: first, that issues unattended generally deteriorate toward greater risk and second, that the longer an issue survives and the later intervention occurs, the fewer choices remain open, the greater the cost, and the less the chances of achieving positive outcomes.

Such models can be effective in illustrating the importance of early intervention to maximize the opportunities and minimize the potential

bottom line impact. However, these models do have a fundamental weakness in that they suggest issue management is a logical, linear process and that issues lend themselves to "resolution." In reality, issues are inherently unpredictable and evolutionary, and the issue management process does not take place in isolation but as part of a total management environment.

Embedding Issue Management

While issue management has developed a strong tradition of proven models and tools, the proper focus of issue management is not on issues but on management. Or put another way, issue management is not about how to manage an issue but about how to manage *because* of an issue. And it is this embedding of issue management as a core management discipline which underpins the transition from process to policy.

A great deal of academic effort has been expended on analyzing—and occasionally overanalyzing—complex management systems for recognizing, categorizing, and prioritizing issues. In fact, Coombs (2002) suggested that there are more than 150 different forecasting techniques to project the potential effects an issue might have on an organization. Academics and practitioners have also introduced novel taxonomy in an attempt to distinguish different management approaches, including anticipatory management (Ashley, 1995); risk issue management (Leiss, 2001); reputation risk management (Larkin, 2003); environmental issue management (Heugens, 2006), strategic issue management (Ansoff, 1980; Schwarz, 2005), and crisis issue management (Kovoor-Misra, 2002).

But in recent years, there has also been an increasing focus on the role of core issue management itself within the broader continuum of management practice, leading to its emergent positioning as part of an integrated response to organizational and societal risks, threats, and challenges.

The two key disciplines within this continuum—issue management and crisis management—saw remarkably similar patterns of development. While issue management as a defined activity began in the late 1970s, the first book devoted solely to issue management was not published until 1984 (*Issue Management: Origins of the Future* by Howard Chase). Significantly, one of the seminal works on the emerging discipline of crisis management was published just 2 years later (*Crisis Management: Planning for the Inevitable* by Steve Fink, 1986).

Although crisis study developed in the 1960s and 1970s, especially in the fields of psychology, sociology, and disaster response (Booth, 1993), the era of formal organizational crisis management as a business discipline reportedly began in the United States after the notorious Tylenol poisoning scandal of 1982 (e.g., Heath & Palenchar, 2009). And it has been claimed that it was not established as an independent research area in Europe until after the Chernobyl disaster in 1986 (e.g., Falkheimer & Heide, 2006).

The parallel progress of issue management and crisis management has in fact been a very important factor in embedding both disciplines within a more integrated response. Defining crisis and crisis management is outside the scope of this chapter (for detailed definitional analysis, see Jaques, 2009b), but more recent developments within crisis management have been critical to the evolution of issue management.

Unlike issue management, where both strategic and tactical elements are well recognized, crisis management as originally conceived was very much a reactive discipline focusing on the situation *after* a crisis has occurred, which perpetuates superficial distinctions and impedes progress. While a crisis is by definition a situation out of control (Benedict, 1994), the concept of crisis management as a purely reactive tactical discipline is now being superseded by a much more comprehensive approach.

Within this more strategic context, crisis management should be seen not just as a tactical reactive response when a crisis hits but as a

proactive discipline embracing interrelated processes ranging from crisis prevention and crisis preparedness through crisis response and on to crisis recovery.

From an early period, crisis management was recognized as constituting both the response to a triggering event and as part of an ongoing process. And while the two approaches are naturally complementary, it has been acknowledged that most practitioners appear to agree on the fact that crises are processes, yet nevertheless often treat them as events. Indeed, Roux-Dufort (2007) concluded that the crisis management literature still mostly develops the event approach, while the process-oriented approach had been less used and developed, both theoretically and in practice.

Similarly, Pauchant and Mitroff (1992) claimed that 90% of the literature focuses on what to do when everything falls apart, for which they coined the neat expression "crash management." Their key distinction was that total crisis management focuses not only on what to do in the heat of a crisis but also on why crises happen and what can be done to prevent them.

A key disadvantage of the event approach is that it has the potential to inhibit examination of the trends and incidents which lead to triggering a crisis. In contrast, the conceptualization of crisis management as a process continuum promotes analysis of the activity extending back before the triggering event and deeper into the preceding phases to identify what Roux-Dufort calls "accumulation of organizational imperfections" (see, e.g., Forgues & Roux-Dufort, 1998; Roux-Dufort, 2007, 2009; Smith, 2005).

In addition to improved characterization of the period leading up to a crisis, the process approach also permits better analysis of the postcrisis situation. Specifically, it explores the management options not just for recovery and business resumption after the event but also for learning from crises (Elliott, Smith, & McGuinness, 2000; Stern, 1997) and addressing longer-term issues which can arise in the wake of a crisis (Heath & Millar, 2004; Jaques, 2009c; Ulmer, Seeger, & Sellnow, 2007).

Although there is obvious complementarity between the event approach and the process approach to crisis management, the process approach is gaining increasing attention, with important implications for the wider areas of management practice. Understanding crisis management in this holistic way helps turn the focus to process rather than definitions and also helps emphasize that the various processes are interrelated clusters of activities rather than being steps within a linear model. In this way, the process approach provides a basis for properly understanding the integral relationship between issue management and crisis management and the other management disciplines which surround them.

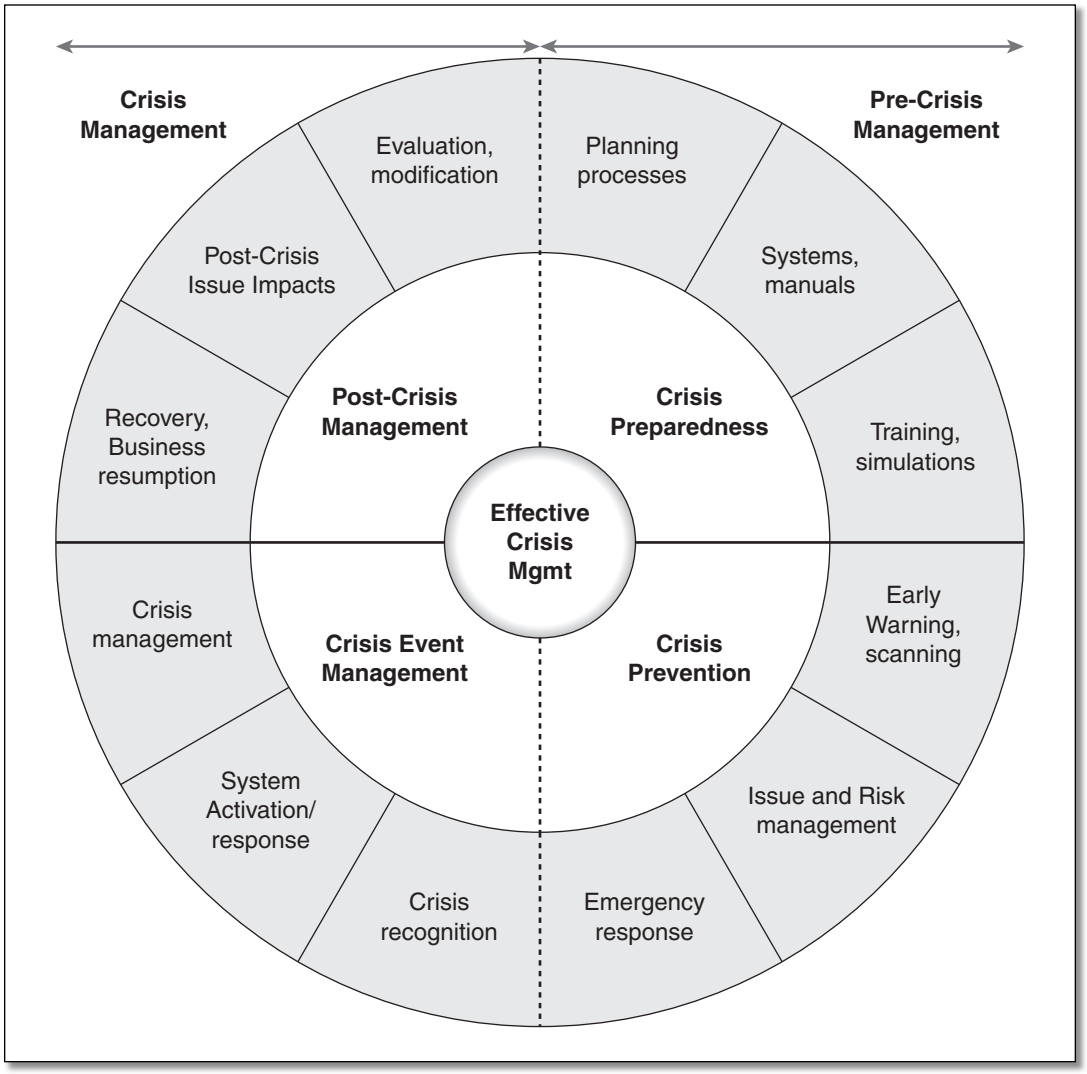
Issue and Crisis Management: An Integrated, Relational Model

The model presented here (Jaques, 2007a) is predicated on the holistic view of crisis management, that crisis prevention and crisis preparedness are just as much parts of the overall process as the tactical steps to take once a crisis strikes (Figure 30.2). Furthermore, the postcrisis cluster of activities has a critical function looping back to preparing for and managing future crises.

The model's nonlinear structure emphasizes that the elements should be seen as clusters of related and integrated disciplines, not as steps to be undertaken in a sequential fashion. While the precrisis and crisis management hemispheres of the model naturally follow each other, some individual elements may occur either overlapping or simultaneously. Indeed, crisis prevention and crisis preparedness, for example, most often *should* happen simultaneously.

It has been said that the best way to manage crises is to understand and manage issues, and in the context of this relational model the full scope of issue management is positioned in both crisis prevention and postcrisis management. In contrast, Heath (1997, p. 289) believes that crisis management is a *part* of issue management, and not vice

Figure 30.2 Issue and Crisis Management Relational Model©



versa. Indeed, he goes further and asserts that crisis management is actually a *function* of issue management. Heath also argued persuasively for going beyond the traditional problem-issue-crisis-resolution linear sequence, emphasizing that not only can crises arise from issues but that issues can arise from crises.

Although this relational model illustrates the interdependence between issue management, crisis management, and the related activities, there is at present no generally agreed taxonomy to define the different elements of management response to potential problems. In this case, the attempt is to distinguish between precrisis management and crisis management and, more important, to introduce and characterize a critical distinction between crisis preparedness and crisis prevention.

Crisis preparedness focuses primarily on systems planning, manuals, documentation, infrastructure, war-rooms, functional checklists, resources, and training, all of which are very important. Indeed, they are the foundation of

effective crisis response. But they make no direct contribution to preventing a crisis happening in the first place. This is the role for the interrelated cluster of activities identified as part of crisis prevention—including audits, risk assessment, social forecasting, environmental scanning, anticipatory management, future studies, and, most critically, issue management.

However, for issue management to be embedded in broader management, it is essential that the process provides effective mechanisms for information to be translated into action. As Stocker (1997) commented,

> Getting information about a potential crisis can be as sophisticated as a formal issues management program or as simple as interviewing your own employees about what could go wrong, or what may be going wrong. . . . In most internally generated crises, the knowledge and potential for a problem was well known in advance of the onset of the public crisis, and top management found out about it as it was going public. (p. 192)

Clearly, early warning and scanning are important in helping prevent a crisis—either chronic or acute—but they are of no value whatever if management ignores, denies, or tries to suppress the warnings.

There has been extensive research into the reasons and rationalizations as to why organizations fail to become crisis prepared, and why issue and crisis warning signs are ignored (e.g., Elliott et al., 2000; Lagadec, 1997; Mitroff & Pauchant, 1990; Smith & Elliott, 2007). But for the present discussion. the important point is that formal issue management provides tools and processes to reduce that risk.

Issue Management After a Crisis

The other key conclusion to be drawn from this model is the importance of issue management as a postcrisis discipline. There is a broad modern recognition that the greatest risk from a crisis, especially legal and reputational, can arise from how the organization responds after the triggering event. Phelps (1986) warned that "when the dust begins to settle, the aftershocks are often more devastating and costly to the organization over the long term than the original crisis" (p. 5) and 't Hart and Boin (2001) later coined the phrase "the crisis after the crisis."

Much of the literature on the postcrisis phase focuses on business recovery, continuity, and renewal, and, from a communication perspective, on postcrisis discourse (e.g., Coombs & Holladay, 2008; Ulmer et al., 2007). But a holistic management approach recognizes the risk from a range of longer-term postcrisis events, such as coronial inquests, judicial or political inquiries, prosecution, prolonged litigation, and hostile media scrutiny. Such issues can persist for years or even decades and may affect a whole industry, not just the organization initially involved. A good example of this is the notorious Exxon Valdez incident, which was first an environmental crisis (a major oil spill), then a management crisis (slow and inadequate response), then a management/litigation issue (sustained legal and public review of management response), and finally an industry safety issue.

In the immediate aftermath of the incident, there was an industry review of bulk tanker construction and navigation in enclosed waters, which led to important changes. But for ExxonMobil another long-term effect was a prolonged and costly reputational issue. Although the oil spill happened in March 1989, the legal compensation argument dragged on for 19 years through acrimonious and damaging appeals and counterappeals, until it was finally settled in the U.S. Supreme Court in June 2008.

In the same way, the Challenger disaster of 1986 led to a prolonged and extremely damaging reputational issue for NASA, and in 2005 Hurricane Katrina triggered a maelstrom of reputational issues for Federal Emergency Management Agency, long after the natural storm and its aftermath had subsided.

All three high-profile examples serve to reinforce, from an organizational perspective, that the longer-term issues resulting from a crisis can cause longer-lasting damage than the crisis itself and require effective and very well-focused management response. By embedding issue management into the continuum of management response, organizations are able to proactively manage issues to reduce the risk of crises developing, to identify and manage the issues which arise in the wake of crises, and can learn from their own experience and the experience of others to adapt and improve the process to address future issues.

Notes

1. The terms *issue* management and *issues* management are both commonly used. Howard Chase, the "father" of the discipline, reportedly quipped it should be issue management not issues management in the same way that it is *brain* surgery not *brains* surgery.

2. The wall chart was later published as a "fold out" in *Issue Management: Origins of the Future* (Chase, 1984).

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