Developing Internal Crisis Communication:

New Roles and Practices of Communication Professionals

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Introduction

This article aims to explore and develop the roles and practices of communication professionals in internal crisis communication. In recent decades, crisis management and crisis communication research have developed into strong research fields, but so far the internal aspect has remarkably been neglected. An internal crisis communication perspective focuses on the need for information, communication and sensemaking among managers and employees during the acute phase of a crisis, and also on the intrinsic role of communication in crisis preparedness, anticipation and learning within an organization (cf. Weick and Sutcliffe, 2007). We now see an increasing interest in internal communication among scholars (e.g. Gilpin and Murphy, 2008; Mazzei, 2010; Taylor, 2010; Frandsen and Johansen, 2011; Johansen et al., 2012; Mazzei et al., 2012), but there is a great need for more research in order to further develop the field of crisis communication (Taylor, 2010). One aspect of crisis communication that is neglected is the role and practices of communication professionals. There has been extensive focus in the literature on crisis managers and their ambitions to handle and solve crises (see Coombs et al., 2010; Gilpin and Murphy, 2010), but we need additional knowledge about the specific role and practices of communication managers and other communication professionals. Several researchers (e.g. Falkheimer and Heide, 2006;

Reber and Berger, 2006; Bowen, 2009; Falkheimer and Heide, 2010) have stressed that crisis management is a field where the communication profession can show its main value and influence critical processes. One distinct example was given during the tsunami catastrophe in Southeast Asia in 2004. With 20,000 Swedish tourists in Thailand, the communication manager of one of the biggest travel agencies in Sweden achieved status as a national heroine in just a few days. Thus, provided that the communicators do their job well, a crisis can actually enhance the value and status of their profession. At the same time, public relations or communication management is often conceived as being equivalent to media management and information dissemination *after* a crisis has occurred (Pearson and Mitroff, 1993; Littlefield et al., 2010), which tends to reduce the communication profession to something reactive and tactical. Thus, even if communication professionals are seen as an indispensable resource in crisis management, it is still an open question as to whether they influence strategic issues and if they have any legitimacy in internal crisis communication.

Against this backdrop, the article has two major purposes. The first purpose is to examine the roles and practices of communication professionals in relation to internal aspects of crisis communication. The second purpose is to suggest new roles and practices for communication professionals that will enable a strategic approach to internal crisis communication. This article is based on empirical material from a larger three-year research project that focuses on internal crisis communication at a university hospital (UH) in Sweden.

The article is divided into four main sections. In the first section, we provide a theoretical framework that is based on earlier research on internal crisis communication and the roles of communication professionals. In the second section, we provide a summary of the method used. The third section contains a presentation of the primary findings, and the last section discusses these findings and the implications for communication professionals and future studies.

Theoretical Framework

We will first present a brief overview of different understandings of crises and the role of internal crisis communication. We make the assumption that the basic understanding of what a crisis is, how it is constituted, how communication and crises are linked to each other etc., will color the roles and practices of communication professionals within an organization. In the second part of the theoretical framework, we introduce some basic concepts from theory of communicator roles and discuss how different understandings of crises may be linked to different ideas of communication professionals.

Crisis and Internal Crisis Communication

A major question in today's organizations is not *if,* but *when* a crisis will evolve. "Bad things happen in and to organizations" (Bozeman, 2011: 120). Crisis is a heavily researched phenomenon, often described as a process that develops through three stages: pre-crisis, crisis and post-crisis (see e.g. Coombs, 2012). Even if these phases can be criticized for giving a simplified view of crises, the division has a pedagogical value. The three-stage model makes it easier to describe, understand and analyze a crisis process and development (cf. Frandsen and Johansen, 2011).

Different traditions, theoretical approaches, methods and academic subjects have led to a flood of definitions and a use of different terms. Beside organizational crisis, terms such as organizational disasters, failures, implosions and catastrophes are used to describe a certain uncertain and equivocal state that demands heavy achievements to be managed. Hence, one can easily conclude that there is no existing consensus on a crisis definition, but that is not necessarily a problem. Rorty (1989) claims that calls for definitions and consensus are misguided in the ambition to find a final vocabulary. Similarly, Clegg and Kornberger (2005) warn us that such a call may lead to an intellectual hegemony that is advantageous to a few scholars.

Even if multiple definitions exist, two overall understandings of crisis can be discerned: a narrow, information-oriented understanding and a broad, meaning-oriented understanding (see Johansen and Frandsen, 2007). The narrow understanding focuses chiefly on the acute crisis phase, and crisis is assumed to be an anomaly. In this view, crises are often seen as isolated, distinct events having an external source that requires a quick and direct response. As a consequence, the focus is on external communication and reactive "damage control" (Kent, 2010). A strong reliance on detailed planning exists and crisis management plans are seen as a key to successful crisis management. Behind this emphasis on control and prediction we also find an "information engineering approach" to communication, which puts emphasis on information diffusion, carefully worded press releases, media contact lists, and training of spokespersons (Gilpin & Murphy, 2008). Communication is thus reduced to a simple tool; skillful and carefully planned communication is supposed to mitigate the effects of a crisis and restore the organization's reputation.

We join the broader understanding where crisis means "that the normal order in a system is destabilized, which creates considerable uncertainty and requires rapid intervention" (Falkheimer and Heide, 2010: 514). In the broader understanding, crisis is seen as a natural stage in an ongoing and natural evolution (Sellnow, 1993; Kersten, 2005). Furthermore, this view puts attention on the whole crisis process with the three stages and its dynamics, and the perceptual aspect of crisis is emphasized. Seeing crises as perceptually produced implies that understanding, sensemaking and enactment is vital. Weick and Sutcliffe (2003: 80) claim the following: "When the unexpected occurs, sensemaking intensifies." If a crisis is based on stakeholders' perceptions, it means that, in most cases, multiple interpretations of a crisis exist (Ulmer et al., 2011). Different stakeholders will understand a crisis in multiple ways, and the most important group – the coworkers – will additionally have different understandings depending on their profession, knowledge, networks, hierarchical position, etc. Thus, in contrast to the narrow view, the broader understanding does not regard

communication as just a tool for the dissemination of information, but rather emphasizes the constituting role (i.e., a weak ontology of being – c.f. Chia, 1995). Another difference is that the broader understanding puts emphasis on improvisation rather than on detailed planning. Each crisis situation is unique, which means that organization members cannot rely on a prewritten plan and must therefore be able to improvise, make situated decisions and try different actions (Falkheimer et al., 2009; Falkheimer and Heide, 2010).

Traditionally, crisis communication scholars have almost exclusively emphasized external dimensions such as response strategies, stakeholder relations and media choices. That can, to a certain extent, be explained by the fact that most crisis communication scholars have their origins in public relations. We find it somewhat astonishing that internal dimensions of crisis communication are so under-researched, not least since the results of crisis management are directly related to coworker perceptions, sensemaking, reactions and actions. When an organization enters an acute crisis phase the information need among coworkers increases dramatically. The broader understanding of crisis implies that internal crisis communication is even more important since communication has a constituting role (cf. Weick et al., 2005; Putnam and Nicotera, 2010) – communication produces and reproduces organizations (Weick, 1995). Coworkers act on their understanding of a situation, which is socially constructed. Further, coworkers are both important ambassadors of the organization and communicators. They discuss the crisis with customers, suppliers, journalists, friends and so forth, and convey their picture of the crisis.

Roles and Practices of Communication Professionals
Roles in an organizational context are vital since they tell us about the expectations of the employees (Fondas and Stewart, 1994; Tindall and Holtzhausen, 2011). Roles are based on the differentiation of work tasks and are the expected patterns of actions. We have above argued that there is still not much research on what communication professionals *actually* do

(i.e., practices) (cf. Mintzberg, 1975) and what their role is in the different phases of a crisis. Reckwitz (2002) defines practices as "routinized types of behaviour which consist of several elements, interconnected to one other: forms of bodily activities, forms of mental activities, 'things' and their use, a background knowledge in the form of understanding, know-how, states of emotion and motivational knowledge" (p. 249). Further Reckwitz argues that the single individual – the communication practitioner in this case – acts as the "carrier" of a practice. However, considering the communication profession in general terms, the role of communication professionals is one of the most researched areas within public relations (Grunig et al., 2002). The primary focus of this research area has been on the tasks, activities and functions of communication professionals – often described in terms of different role typologies. Broom and Smith (1979) introduced the role research in public relations, and launched the distinction between expert prescriber, communication facilitator, problem-solver and communication technician. They have a conceptual and deductive approach, while newer research is inductive and based on empirical material.[1] Later research has shown that the first three roles are closely related and, consequently, a two-fold distinction between managers and technicians has been suggested (Dozier, 1992; Dozier and Broom, 1995). Grunig, Grunig and Dozier (2002: 255) strongly argue that "the availability of knowledge to perform a managerial role distinguishes excellent [communication] departments from less excellent ones."

However, the dichotomy of managers and technicians has been criticized for being too categorical (Creedon, 1991; Toth et al., 1998). Newer research (e.g. Tindall and Holtzhausen, 2011; Werder and Holtzhausen, 2011) confirms that the strategist role is closely related to all communication roles. There is thus a need for more research on what communication management actually means in practice (e.g. Moss et al., 2000; Moss and Green, 2001). Ankney and Curtin (2002) have studied communication professionals in a hospital and have concluded that communicators often work as boundary spanners even if the surgeons tend to

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[1] We owe this remark to one of the reviewers of the article.

see public relations as just functionary, i.e. disseminating information from management to receivers (cf. Bell and Bell, 1976). Other scholars (e.g. , 2002; Kim and Reber, 2009; Steyn and Niemann, 2010) stress the role of boundary spanners between management and the sociopolitical environment (taking an external perspective). It is also often argued that excellent communication is dependent upon access to top management/the dominant coalition (e.g. Fearn-Banks, 2001; Grunig et al., 2002). Bowen (2009) has studied how communication professionals get access to the dominant coalition. She identified five routes: (1) organizational crisis, (2) ethical dilemma, (3) credibility gained over time, (4) issues high on the media agenda, and (5) leadership. Of these, organizational crisis was the most important and strongest route. A prerequisite seems to be that communication professionals have adequate knowledge about management (cf. Kinnick and Cameron, 1994). Steyn (2009) claims that the roles as educationist and strategist/reflectionist are important for communication professionals if they want to move further to a strategic organization level. Finally, Zerfaß and Franke (2013) maintain that the role of internal consultant facilitating co-worker communication is a way to attain the communicative organization, and the communication professionals will accordingly expand their responsibility and role in the organization.

The distinction between a narrow and a broad understanding of a crisis has a clear implication on the roles of communication professionals. With the narrow understanding comes an emphasis on operational and tactical communication aspects (i.e., the technician role) such as writing press releases, disseminating rapid information to key stakeholders, designing crisis communication plans, etc. The broad perspective does not imply that such tasks and roles are unimportant, but they need to be supplemented with a focus on managerial roles and strategic communication aspects. However, it could also be argued that the managerial role needs to be further clarified and nuanced, which Nothhaft (2010) shows in a study of roles and functions, i.e., what someone is expected to do when performing his/her

role as communication executive. Nothhaft argues that communication management is more of a second-order management function than a first-order management function. This means that communication management is "a function which not only coordinates organizational performance by planning, organizing, controlling, but also institutionalizes certain concerns in the organization (p. 127)."

Method

The findings presented in this article are part of a larger case study at a Swedish university hospital that focuses on various aspects of internal crisis communication. In order to collect rich and nuanced material, we have used several methods (interviews, observations and document analysis). We have analyzed the empirical material from an interpretive approach, implying that meanings, beliefs and understandings were put in the center rather than "objective" facts (cf. Alvesson and Sveningsson, 2011).

For the purpose of this article we have mainly analyzed transcripts of twenty-four semi-structured interviews that lasted 1–1.5 hours each. We have chosen to interview both communication professionals and other key persons/crisis managers in order to have the role and practices of communication professionals elucidated not only from the perspective of the communication professionals themselves. Eight of the interviewees are communication professionals. Within this group there is a mixture of different titles and roles (e.g., communication manager, vice communication manager, press officer and crisis communicator), and some of them work at the central communication department whereas others work at different divisions. The other sixteen persons that we interviewed have different key roles in the crisis organization, e.g., catastrophe coordinators, head physicians, the head of the emergency department, and the safety manager.

The interview questions comprised several themes: general conception of crisis; previous experiences with crisis management and crisis communication; opinions of crisis-

preparedness documents and different crisis management roles; ideas of the role of communication professionals before, during and after a crisis; opinions on how internal communication functions in "normal" situations and specifically in times of crisis situations. We analyzed the transcribed interviews by reading them several times, and searched for patterns and themes.

In addition to the interviews, we examined crisis management plans and different internal evaluations. During fall 2011, we also observed a full-day, regional crisis exercise that involved several different actors such as the hospital, police, rescue services and other regional hospitals. This article is primarily based on the interviews, and the other empirical material serves mainly as background information.

The design of a case study means that we have been able to develop an understanding not only of the roles and practices of communication professionals *per se*, but also of the organizational context they work within and their relationships with other actors within that context. Roles and practices do not exist in a social vacuum, and in order to understand the interconnectedness between roles, practices and organizational context we thought it was more valuable to gain context-dependent rather than context-independent knowledge (cf. Flyvbjerg, 2006; Halkier, 2011). As we will describe below, a hospital is, in many ways, a very specific organization in that it works in a risky environment and almost daily enters into situations that can turn into a crisis. From that perspective, the UH can be described as an extreme case (Flyvbjerg, 2006), increasing our possibilities to gain information about various crisis communication processes. If we had chosen a less risky organization, we would probably have material that was less rich to learn from. On the other hand, we still think that the implications from this study can be valid for communications professionals not only in other hospitals, but also in other complex, knowledge-intensive organizations.

Findings

From the findings in our study, we first present UH – the organizational context the communication professionals operate within – and the predominating crisis conception. We then focus on the position in the organization structure, the legitimacy and the role of communication professionals. We then discuss the channels and content in internal crisis communication. Finally we focus on operational and tactical aspects versus strategic aspects of internal crisis communication.

An organization where the unexpected is expected

The University Hospital (UH) in our study has 11,000 employees and is a complex, multi-professional organization. The hospital is rather new, founded in January 2010 after a merger between two former university hospitals in two different cities. The merger was sudden, heavily debated both internally and in the media, and is still in progress. The sheer size, the complexity and the current turbulent situation means that there are many kinds of potential and actual crises within UH – patient safety issues, trust crises, internal conflicts, technical errors, etc.

Hospitals, such as UH, are rather unique, not least from a crisis perspective. The medical staff at the hospital – at least in the emergency department – is confronted daily with human crises in the form of road traffic injuries, gunshot injuries, stabbings, heart attacks, and so on. This could be interpreted as UH being in a never-ending state of small and large crises; the unexpected is, in that way, expected. According to our interviewees, crisis is an *elixir of life* for the (medical) staff – they "go at it" and they frequently handle and solve "crisis" situations. After reviewing internal documents and interviewing different people, we can conclude that the over-all crisis management system is focused on medical crisis and catastrophes. This focus is similar to what Frandsen and Johansen (2009) call an emergency logic, i.e., a narrow and event-oriented approach that focuses on accidents and disasters,

whereas bad management, corruption, scandals, etc. are excluded from the crisis conception. The strong focus on medical crisis is also reflected in the coworkers' understanding of "crisis." When we asked the interviewees to explain what "crisis" means to them, we received fairly similar answers in line with the following quote: "when continuous healthcare can't be achieved and when work efforts exceed resources." This emphasis on "patient safety" might create a culture that can prevent coworkers from detecting problems and early signals of negative changes. Weick and Sutcliffe's (2003) study of a British university hospital indicates that a "safety culture," which describes a set of assumptions and practices for medical staff in order to be able to produce optimal care, can blind coworkers and be a source of danger. A coworker's ambition to follow the culture seems to produce rationalization processes that hinder learning, cross-specialty communication and adverse events. Thus, other aspects of crisis are forgotten in the organization. One such example is the merger process that some coworkers perceive as a large crisis. The worries and insecurity that coworkers may feel are not in itself a crisis, but may make them inattentive and lead to mistakes, failures and even crisis.

The Role of Communication Professionals

Having said that UH is a complex organization that enters situations on a daily basis that may develop into crises, we will now look into the role of communication professionals in such an organization. Let us start by noting that the communication manager of UH does not have a seat at the table with top management. She was previously a member of top management, but lost her membership in the beginning of the merger process when top management was reorganized. Not surprisingly, both the communication manager and her employees underlined when they were interviewed that this has reduced their influence and possibilities to work strategically and take a managerial role in the organization. Even so, when some kind of crisis occurs, the communication manager is still invited to top management. Bowen's

(2009) routes to the board, where crisis communication is the strongest, could explain why she is still invited. These "special" invitations indicate that the value of communication expertise is recognized in times of crisis, but since the membership only applies to the acute crisis phase the communication professionals tend to be locked into an operational/tactical role focused on *re*sponse and *re*action.

The communication manager and the two press officers seem to be quite well known among key persons in the crisis organization, according to our interviews. However, the other communication officers at the department do not seem to have any close relationship with key persons working with crisis management, which, according to some of the interviewed communicators, makes it more difficult to do good work once you are "called for" in an acute crisis. Consequently, it is not only the lack of membership in top management that prevents a managerial role, but also a of lack informal relationships that render trust and access.

Several interviewees (both communication professionals and others) mention examples of turbulent situations (primarily a nurses strike and mass swine flu vaccination) when the communication professionals have had a key role and contributed to a successful outcome. These examples are directly related to healthcare and can be seen as illustrating the narrow focus on medical crises and the acute phase, rather than the pre- and post-crisis phases. As a consequence, even if the communicators in these successful examples have worked together with top management and, to a certain extent, practiced a strategic managerial role it is still quite limited and the operational role seems to dominate. Furthermore, the interviews demonstrate that the role of communication professionals in crisis situations is primarily associated with media relations, web and text production. One of the communication officers expresses it as follows:

When you participate in different groups you are expected to give advice on what to publish on the website and what to send to media. *[…]* We haven't had the time but we need to clarify what we [the communication department] can do. At present, we aren't even members of top

management and managers rather close to us have the idea that we are very operative. Media and web – that's what we are.

We believe that this can be explained by a narrow understanding of crisis (cf. above), which is linked to a transmission view of communication and an idea of communication professionals as being first and foremost messengers and media specialists. As a consequence, communication professionals make fire station turnouts when there is an organizational crisis and their strategic skills and understanding are not used completely. Johansson and Ottestig (2011) have found that communication executives perceive their external legitimacy to be much stronger than their internal legitimacy. Also Merkelsen (2011) discusses the problem with low internal legitimacy and lack of recognition from management. This pattern seems to apply for communication professionals within UH. Having greater external legitimacy might also reinforce an idea among managers and other groups that communication professionals can add much more value to external relationships rather than to internal communication processes and relationships.

Channels and Contents

As mentioned above, communication professionals within UH are mainly associated with web and media when it comes to crisis situations. Consequently, they do not seem to have any clear or crucial role in internal crisis communication. One of the interviewed communicators belonging to a division told us that she is not at all involved in crisis communication: "Crisis communication is something that is more or less solely handled by line managers." Overall, there seems to be a strong reliance on communication through managers in times of crisis. At the same time, interviewees argue that there is a strong need for fast and reliable internal communication channels in crisis situations. According to the interviewees, it is not possible to reach a large number of managers and employees through texting and it is very difficult to maintain up-to-date phone lists. The intranet is today the most important channel in crisis

situations (even if most employees do not work with a computer as a daily tool), and it is also intranet publishing that seems to be the most important task for communication professionals in relation to internal crisis communication.

Sturges (1994) has made a distinction between three kinds of crisis communication content objectives: a) *instructional information* tells people affected by the crisis what to do to protect themselves physically; b) *adjusting information* helps people handle psychological aspects of the crisis (uncertainty, stress, trauma, etc.); and c) *internalizing information,* which people draw on to form an image of the organization. Applying the last category to internal communication, it can also be seen as constructing the organizational identity. Sturges (1994) argues that it is most important to focus on instructional and adjusting information during the acute phase, whereas internalizing information should be emphasized before and after the crisis.

The interviews indicate that internalizing information is neglected the most at UH. Of course, there are no clear-cut differences between the three categories and if the first two mentioned categories are handled well it will also have a positive influence on image and identity (Johansen & Frandsen, 2007). Even so, it can be argued that internalizing communication is most strongly connected to a strategic managerial role and this is also the kind of communication of which the communication department is the principal "owner." In this context, it should be noted that several interviewees perceive external media to be much faster than internal channels. As a huge public organization in change, UH is subject to extremely strong media exposure. The hospital is in the regional newspaper almost daily, quite often in negative articles focusing on cost-savings, problematic effects of the merger, etc. This media exposure has strong implications for UH's internal communication processes and the construction of organizational identity (cf. Sinclair, 2011). Communication professionals at UH cannot prevent media interest, but in times of crisis there is a need for

commenting on and discussing the external media picture internally (i.e., a typical example of internalizing communication).

Crisis strategies more important than crisis plans

Something rather striking is the fact that UH has no special communication plan or communication strategy for crisis situations. When interviewing the communication professionals it is also evident that they do not have any profound knowledge of the existing crisis plans for the two sites. The communications manager comments:

The preparedness of the communication department is based on our previous experiences. We cannot rely on the documents [the crisis plans] – that would drive us crazy!

When this study was carried out, UH had two different crisis plans – one for each city – which is a remnant from the time before the merger. The two crisis plans use different terminology and the merger between the two hospitals has made parts of them irrelevant. As the communications manager's quote indicates, this has caused great frustration, and there is now ongoing work to integrate the two crisis plans into one coherent plan. In both previous and current work with crisis plans, there is a strong focus on the plan as a *product* rather than the implementation *process* of it. There is evidently a built-in process in the actual production of the plan, but that process usually involves a very limited number of employees. As a matter of fact, the interviewees – communication professionals, catastrophe coordinators, line managers alike – do not seem to have any clear picture of how the crisis plan is communicated and implemented. Again, there seems to be great trust in line managers taking care of the process, but they are not given any clear directions or communicative support. The focus on the product rather than the process can also be seen as a reflection of an information engineering approach – as long as the plan is disseminated on the intranet it is assumed that it will also be understood and used as intended.

Even though we have found deficiencies in the work with crisis plans, it is clear that UH has handled several crisis situations quite well. Does this mean that crisis plans are overrated? Marra (1998) argues so and underlines that "crisis communication plans are only *part* of what determines excellent crisis public relations practice" (p. 463). Marra claims that the communication culture of the organization and the level of autonomy and power of the public relations department are equally important predictors of how well an organization manages a crisis. Several of the interviewees argue that the hospital works at its best in times of crisis and turbulence. "It's in our nature to fast get up on tiptoe," argued one of the interviewees. Further, the coworkers are well trained to manage difficult situations and seem to do so satisfactorily if the crisis is not too outstretched. Thus, in line with Marra's reasoning, it can be stated that the organizational culture has an inherent ability to solve crises without excellent crisis plans. But according to the interviewees, the organization is also dominated by a "here-and-now-focus," and they are not good at learning from previous experiences, planning for the future or making strategies. Consequently, it appears to be equally important – if not more – to develop a crisis communication strategy, as it is to develop a plan focused on tactical aspects during the acute phase.

One major obstacle for developing a strong strategy seems to be the lack of a common idea of the role of communication professionals in internal crisis communication among the communicators themselves. Some of the interviewed communication professionals remarked that they have not really discussed their role in times of crisis and some think they have different ideas of what it should be. It is also obvious that some of the communication professionals find it difficult to communicate what competence and abilities they can add in crisis situations – except from traditional tasks such as media contacts and text production. An example of this difficulty was found during the observation of the crisis exercise that is included in our empirical material. One of the communication professionals expressed that she was frustrated at having been "under-used" during the exercise (her main role had been to

follow the information flow through a national IT-system for sharing information during crises). When one of the doctors asked (also in a quite frustrated tone, signaling that everyone has to take their own initiatives) what support she expected others to have asked for, the communication professional did not have a clear answer. Thus, it is quite obvious that there is a need to discuss and clarify what it means for communicators to work strategically and practice a managerial role. Likewise, the interviewees do not have any clear idea of the purpose of internal crisis communication. The implicit assumption seems to be that internal crisis communication is about getting the right people at the right place to do the right things (instructional communication) rather than to frame the understanding of the crisis (internalizing communication). In a crisis, people have a stronger need to understand and make sense of the situation. Sensemaking is not about receiving the "truth" and doing the "right" things, but fulfilling people's desire to answer the question "what's the story?" (Weick, 1995).

Discussions

It is often argued that crises are situations when the influence and value of communication professionals becomes evident. But does this necessarily mean that crises are situations when communication professionals practice managerial roles and work strategically? Our study indicates that this is not the case – especially when it comes to internal communication. The role of the studied communication professionals is primarily focused on information distribution through the intranet, even though they are also involved in strategic managerial work during the acute stage of the crisis. Communication professionals are first and foremost called for once the crisis has already occurred, which can be seen as a "communication on demand" approach, limiting a strategic orientation.

In trying to understand the role of communication professionals, it is necessary to grasp the organizational context within which they work. As with other hospitals, UH

operates in a risky environment but still has few incidents since it is committed to safety

aspects and work (Sutcliffe, 2011). Doctors and nurses at UH are frequently trained in

handling difficult and hazardous situations that involve a large degree of uncertainty and

equivocality. But it can also be argued that the strong urge and ability to solve acute medical

crises is a double-edged sword: it is a vital and necessary skill, but it keeps the organization

locked in a rather narrow event-oriented view of crises and reduces the incentive to develop a

broader, strategic approach to crises. We believe that a chief problem with crisis management

at UH is the absence of a *strategic crisis management thinking and discourse*. This is, for

example, reflected in the two crisis and catastrophe plans that are both fairly

operational/tactical and exclusively focused on medicine and healthcare issues. It also reflects

a lack of a centrally located crisis management function. Much of crisis management is

decentralized to the emergency department and functions such as risk-and vulnerability

analysis, but there is no clear integration and coordination between various functions and

positions. We have also seen that there is a lack of strategic *crisis communication* – not least

in relation to the ideas of the purpose of internal communication. With such an organizational

context, it becomes natural for the communication professionals to cling to "safe" areas such

as text production and media relations in both crisis and normal circumstances – that is, they

tend to take a technical role (or no role at all in certain crisis situations) rather than a

managerial and strategic role.

Taking internal crisis communication seriously and adopting a broader view of crises

will raise new demands on communication professionals that go beyond the operational and

tactical roles in the acute phase of the crisis. Based on the interviews and previous research in

the field, we will suggest some roles for communication professionals that will extend their

involvement to all stages of a crisis:

- **Pre-crisis phase** – In this phase the main focus is on anticipation by detecting risks,

    reporting failures, "near failures" and miscommunications (Weick and Sutcliffe,

2007). Coworkers are an organization's tentacles and are experts with much experience and knowledge, giving them the best qualifications for detecting weak signals early, acting and thereby preventing a crisis. It is important that a *crisis awareness climate* emerges that creates mindfulness that supports reporting and discussing of "almost crisis" on a regular basis. Communication professionals in this phase are responsible for facilitating and encouraging managers to put crises in the forefront and encourage coworkers to be heedful of potential crisis sources. A general challenge is to maintain the awareness and not gradually accept the changes or anomalies as normal and innocuous.

      Key roles: a *"big ear"* – identifying risks and gathering weak signals; a *facilitator* of an open and mindful climate; and a *guard* against anomalies developing into something normal.

- **Crisis** – Just when a crisis has started the main focus is to provide coworkers with fast information about the situation through several types of media. It is also essential that coworkers have opportunities to discuss the situation and make sense via dialogue with other coworkers and managers. This is not least important since coworkers are organizational ambassadors and their understandings are communicated to other stakeholders. Hence, communication professionals must offer fast, updated and reliable information to coworkers, ensure that internal chats and discussion groups are active and that key actors distribute information and answer questions. Communication professionals should also act as internal counselors to line managers and other key persons in order to help them formulate messages and identify actors and groups with whom they should be communicating.

      Key roles: a *messenger* and *sense-giver*; a *director* who facilitates and stages the communication between various groups of employees; and an *internal counselor* who helps managers and coworkers handle their crisis communication.

- **Post-crisis** – After a crisis has occurred it is vital to concentrate on resilience, that is "to be mindful about errors *that have already occurred*" (Weick and Sutcliffe, 2007: , p. 68). Coworkers have a need to dissect and discuss a crisis that has occurred in order to be able to make sense of the situation. They may want to know what happened, what went wrong and what can be done to prevent a similar situation in the future. Resilience is also important from a learning perspective in preventing or minimizing risks that a similar crisis evolves. Communication professionals can, for instance, be responsible for establishing and supporting communication platforms, e.g., on Yammer or discussion groups on the organizational intranet, where new knowledge about the crisis can be discussed and shared with others in an organization.

  Key roles: a *pedagogue* who facilitates learning through sense-giving and providing platforms that can enhance learning processes.

Implications for communication professionals and future studies

We would finally like to present some implications for practice as well as research. Starting with practice, the study shows that there are some important prerequisites for fulfilling a strategic role as a communication professional:

Board membership: The first step the communication department needs to take is to have a seat at the board, giving improved prerequisites for the communication manager to build relationships with managers and to enhance a communication perspective. However, board membership is not a guarantee for influence from communication professionals in the decision-making (Reber & Berger, 2006). Thus this first step is best described as necessary but not sufficient in order to work strategically.

Diversified communication roles: Reber and Berger (2006: 246) underline that if communication professionals are to be seen as influential they "[…] must exhibit their

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strategic and decision-making prowess and their political will." A step toward this direction is to diversify the services the communication department offers; it must be able to deliver both managerial and technical expertise. The role as a media expert and messenger is certainly essential (not least in light of a changing media landscape), but there is a need for an extended cast that includes roles such as director, counselor, pedagogue and facilitator.

A developed managerial role: We believe it is essential to reflect on what it really means to be a communication manager. Traditional *managerialism* is imbued with a strong belief in rationalism, and there are several reasons to question the rationale behind managerialism (cf. Heide and Simonsson, 2011). Instead of having an ambition to be an all-knowing superhero, managers, and especially communication managers, must take the role of facilitation and development of others' communication seriously. Communication managers thus have a vital role as enablers of strategic communication and must act as internal consultants facilitating the line manager's communication (Mazzei, 2012; Zerfaß and Franke, 2013).

Close to core operations: If communication professionals are to work more strategically with crisis communication, a precondition is that they work together with the persons responsible for crisis management and focus on both the acute crisis and proactive activities that stimulate anticipation and resilience. In order to gain legitimacy and work strategically in a crisis situation the communications professionals must build relationships and be a part of important organizational networks. One way of doing this would be to decentralize the communication function to departments in the organization and thereby offer communication consultation to both managers and coworkers.

Legitimacy: A general problem for communication professionals is that internal communication has a rather low legitimacy in organizations. That is somewhat striking since communication professionals tend to appreciate internal communication as one of the most important specialist fields that will have even greater importance in the future (e.g. Zerfaß et

al., 2011). We believe that if communication professionals embrace the roles and practices suggested here, they will gradually gain increased internal legitimacy, and internal communication will be given higher priority.

Most of the suggestions presented here are not only relevant to crisis communication, but can also be applied to roles and practices of communication professional in "normal" situations. However, in order to work strategically with crisis communication it is necessary to integrate it in the everyday, regarding it as continuous work rather than as a separate task that is isolated to specific situations and time periods.

When it comes to implications for future research we would like to see more studies on internal crisis communication in areas that still remain relatively unexplored. What are the information needs, communication practices and roles of managers and co-workers in turbulent times? Furthermore, we would like to call for more research on the new roles and practices of communication professionals that we have suggested in this article. Future research needs to delve deeper into the practices and processes of these roles and study how various organizational contexts are reflected in the actual work of communication professionals. There is also much room for more studies using qualitative methods, e.g., using observations and shadowing techniques (see Czarniawska, 2007). Earlier studies have, through questionnaires and interviews, mapped what communication professionals *say they do*, but we need to know more about what they *actually do in practice*, for example, in their role as internal consultants and enablers of strategic communication.

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