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Permanently on standby: Practitioner perspectives on the complexities of crisis planning

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Abstract

Although crisis planning (including both prevention and preparation) is well-established as the 'alpha' of crisis management, businesses often find themselves caught off-guard in the face of crises. What impedes business organizations from heeding scholarly advice to engage in crisis planning? Interviews with corporate communication professionals suggest that in a fast-evolving digital landscape characterized by the ambiguity of what 'qualifies' as a crisis, the need for an organizational culture of preparedness and balancing structure with agility are the hallmarks of crisis planning. Even when interviewees acknowledge the importance of crisis planning, cultivating a culture of preparedness is contingent on an engaged leadership that recognizes and provides communication professionals a seat at the table, fosters internal coordination, and understands the importance of peacetime relationships with stakeholders. Our paper addresses the complexities and implications of crisis planning that is typically hidden from view.

KEYWORDS

communication, crisis planning, culture of preparedness, leadership, precrisis, social media

1 | INTRODUCTION

Although crisis planning involving both prevention and preparation has always been important in scholarship (as envisioned in the Precrisis phase; see Coombs, 2014), it is often ignored or sidelined in business planning (e.g., Pang et al., 2006). Crisis planning has been linked to several positive outcomes from sheer survival to lower casualties and minimized reputation damage (Mitroff & Alpaslan, 2003) and designated as 'not only the right, ethical thing to do, but [as] good for business' (Mitroff, 2019, p. 92).

Despite its purported importance, businesses are often caught off guard in the face of crises. Already two decades ago, Mitroff and Alpaslan (2003) reported that $\pm 75\%$ of *Fortune 500*

companies were unprepared to manage unfamiliar crises, and at worst, 95% were unprepared. Since then and despite a plethora of supporting evidence suggesting that crisis planning is the 'alpha' of crisis management (Coombs & Holladay, 2012), the state of crisis planning is largely unchanged. Surveys consistently emphasize the high (financial, regulatory, and reputation) costs accruing from the absence of comprehensive crisis planning. For example, a study by Deloitte (2018) identified a wide gap between business' crisis confidence (90%) and actual preparedness (17%), results that echo previous years e.g., Deloitte's, 2015 survey found similar levels of optimism among board members (76%) yet less than half of these engaged in crisis preparedness by way of environmental monitoring and/or ready crisis plans.

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At the same time, the crisis landscape has undergone a metamorphosis. By definition, a crisis is 'the perception of an unpredictable event that threatens important expectancies of stakeholders and can seriously impact an organization's performance and generate negative outcomes' (Coombs, 2007, pp. 2–3). Said another way, crises are typically low probability, public/visible events with high consequence, demand rapid action, temporal, morally and emotional laden, and novel and ambiguous (Riggio & Newstead, 2023, p. 207).

Depending on the degree of (perceived) responsibility, severity, scope, and predictability, crises have been variously classified as victim, accident, and preventable (Coombs, 2007), flash and creeping crises (Helsloot & Groenendaal, 2017), and operational and reputation crises (Sohn & Lariscy, 2014). Regardless, all crises are posited to create three, interrelated, threats—public safety, financial loss, and reputation loss—necessitating appropriate organizational action and response (Coombs, 2014). While extant categorizations remain valid, Boin and Hart (2003) contend that 'the modern crisis is increasingly complex...not spatially confined by common boundaries [...] and its impact is prolonged' (p. 545). The COVID-19 pandemic illustrates 'the interconnected and essentially unbounded nature' of such problems (e.g., Fischbacher-Smith & Adekola, 2022). Arguably, the evolution of crises including their nature and effects may necessitate new ways of conceptualization and categorization (Riggio & Newstead, 2023).

Moreover, social media and digitalization have contributed to the permanently impermanent state of crises that call for more robust and proactive approaches to crisis management (e.g., Lee, 2020). Increased polarization, digital backlash, and stakeholder activism, among others, render organizations vulnerable to a variety of crises (e.g., hoaxes, rumors, parodies, etcetera). In social-mediated environments, organizations are susceptible to what Coombs and Holladay (2012) term as 'paracrisis' aka 'a publicly visible crisis threat that charges an organization with irresponsible or unethical behavior' (p. 409). If left unattended, paracrises risk escalating into full-fledged crises.

Collectively, these developments exacerbate the uncertain and volatile environment in which (crisis) managers must operate (POP: Power of People, 2022) and arguably necessitate an even stronger focus on the importance of crisis planning in organizations. Given the variety and scope of crises that organizations can face at any moment, there are compelling arguments to be made for practitioners and researchers to revisit the importance of crisis planning. Important to note is that crisis planning does not begin and end with a crisis plan. Even when a crisis plan is advised as an important mechanism in the Precrisis phase, crisis planning refers to an 'ongoing process' (Seeger, 2006, p. 238) that 'involves the prevention of crises, and preparation for crises to minimize damage to the organization' (Coombs & Laufer, 2018, p. 200). Therefore, we ask the following research question: *What impedes (business) organizations from engaging in crisis planning (prevention and preparedness)?*

This question is important for several reasons including the frequency and variation of crises and the documented state of organizational (un)preparedness. Additionally, while research on crisis

management in the digital age is growing rapidly, it often focuses on crisis communication and privileges crisis 'response' strategies (e.g., Cheng, 2018) or the communicative actions an organization takes during and after a crisis including how they respond to, explain and address crisis events, and the lessons learned (Marsen, 2020). Understandably, crisis response is crucial to successful crisis handling and postcrisis learning but does not shed light on organizational planning and preparedness in the first place. Rather the crisis planning and decision-making processes in business organizations are typically inaccessible and hidden from view (Pang et al., 2006) making it challenging for researchers to acquire real-time insights into organizational dynamics before a crisis occurs.

To gain insights into how crisis practitioners engage with crisis planning in preparation and anticipation of crises, we conducted semi-structured in-depth interviews with German communication professionals with extensive expertise in crisis management. The decision to focus on corporate communication professionals was guided by extant research which finds that communication issues are implicated in crisis emergence and escalation even when a crisis is technical or noncommunicative in nature (Marsen, 2020, p. 166). By engaging in issue signaling, risk mitigation, and/or clear and urgent communication to relevant stakeholders (Marsen, 2020), crisis communication practitioners may well be the first line of defense in crisis planning.

Next, we review relevant literature to outline to imperative of crisis planning.

2 | LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 | Organizations in crisis

No organization is immune to crises (Coombs, 2019) and major crises have the potential to severely damage an organization's reputation and financial performance, and threaten public safety (Coombs, 2014). In a so-called risk society with increasing uncertainty (Beck, 2009), there is a constant possibility of crises occurring; or, as Frandsen and Johansen (2017) put it, 'crisis is becoming the norm' (p. 1). In the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, this warning has firmly entrenched the importance of crisis preparedness and the need to build resilience in a state of permacrisis (PwC, 2023).

Fearn-Banks (2016) defines a crisis as a significant event with the potential for negative outcomes that affect the organization, its stakeholders, products, services, or reputation (p. 1). Crises disrupt normal business operations and can threaten the organization's license to operate (Fearn-Banks, 2016; Frandsen & Johansen, 2020). 'Preventable crises' aka organizational misdeeds and harm due to human error (Coombs, 2007) are especially associated with high attributions of responsibility and consequently more reputation damage relative to operational crises (Coombs, 2014). Hence, crisis management, defined as 'a set of factors designed to combat crises and to lessen the actual damage inflicted by a crisis' (Coombs, 2015), is an indispensable part of business survival.

Crisis management, and in particular crisis communication, has a long academic history (see Coombs, 2014), too exhaustive to summarize here. We focus instead on crisis planning—the importance of which has been solidified in the Precrisis phase of crisis management and a phase that is often overlooked as an integral part of an all-round (crisis) management strategy (Frandsen & Johansen, 2017). Incorporating both prevention and preparation, the Precrisis phase 'involves the prevention of crises, and preparation for crises to minimize damage to the organization' (Coombs & Laufer, 2018, p. 200).

In relation to prevention and preparation, Pearson and Mitroff (1993) note that the goal of crisis management 'to do as much as possible to prevent crises from occurring in the first place and to effectively manage those which still happen despite best efforts' (p. 53). Indeed, in the case of 'flash crises' that are 'sudden (unexpected) and significant' (Helsloot & Groenendaal, 2017, p. 350), early warning signals for crisis prevention may not always exist. While it is true that certain crises can be foreseen and preemptive measures can help mitigate the associated risks, it is important to acknowledge that not all crises can be prevented or readily predicted (Coombs, 2019). This, however, does not preclude the importance of crisis planning (Pearson & Mitroff, 1993) and therefore the need to be prepared to effectively handle such contingencies.

The combination of being ready for crises by taking (preventive) actions that minimize vulnerability to crises and being prepared to respond in the best possible way when a crisis occurs is the essence of crisis preparedness (Reilly, 1993, cf. Elsubbaugh et al., 2004). Employing the analogy of a homeowner, Jaques (2013) aptly sums up the importance of both prevention and preparation stating that anyone who owns a home would do well to install smoke detectors to notice any sign of a fire in time and prevent an outbreak. Nevertheless, if a fire does break out, it would be wise to have a fire extinguisher at home—that is, to be prepared. Likewise, organizations need to engage in both crisis prevention and preparation as part of crisis planning.

2.2 | Crisis planning in research and practice

The importance of crisis planning is argued as a proactive approach to crisis management and a best practice in crisis communication. It entails risk identification and mitigation, preparing initial crisis responses, and allocating necessary resources for crisis response (Seeger, 2006). Typically, organizations are advised to prepare a crisis plan describing procedures to follow during a crisis, the appointment of a crisis management team, pre-drafted crisis messages, etcetera., that is annually updated (Coombs, 2014). Although a crisis plan is often considered the bedrock of Precrisis management (e.g., Coombs, 2014, 2019), it does not, by itself, constitute a comprehensive approach to crisis planning.

Indeed, crisis planning 'should be treated as ongoing process rather than as a specific, tangible outcome' (Seeger, 2006, p. 238).

Planning ensures quick strategic action in a crisis, as there is less time and increased decision-making pressure in a crisis (Schwarz & Löffelholz, 2014). Mitroff and Alpaslan (2003) further differentiate between organizations that are crisis prepared (or proactive) versus crisis prone (or reactive). Businesses that are prone to crises often prepare solely for the types of disasters they have previously endured, and not always for every one of those. Conversely, companies that are prepared for crises devise strategies to manage a more extensive number and diverse array of emergencies than those they have previously confronted. But what prevents organizations from recognizing and acting upon scientific recommendations?

Management inertia, resource constraints, and a denial mindset that crisis would strike often act as inhibitors to effective crisis planning (Pang et al., 2006). A short-term orientation privileging 'pressing issues related to the profitability, marketing, and production aspects of the business to worry about "what-ifs"' severely undermines crisis planning (cf. Pang et al., 2006, p. 374). Both in public and corporate crises, the aversion to crisis planning is confirmed in other research. For example, Boin and Hart (2003) note that leaders attend to crisis planning only if they have prior crisis experience or are embedded in communities with a crisis history. Conversely, others have argued that while perceptions of a crisis as 'threat' may propel proactive crisis planning, it is equally important to attend to the opportunity dimensions. Doing so may reduce the propensity to panic. Because 'managers generally view opportunistic situations to be more controllable,' (Penrose, 2000, p. 156) a dualistic perspective may enhance 'the ability to consider various alternatives and thus a greater extent of proactive planning' (Ibid).

Conceding that not all crises are predictable, Watkins and Bazerman (2003) argue that failure to address even the more common 'predictable surprises' (e.g., financial scandals, operational disruptions, product failures, etc.) stems from one or a combination of three vulnerabilities:

...Psychological (cognitive defects that leave individuals blind to approaching threats), organizational (barriers within companies that impede communication and dilute accountability), and ... political (flaws in decision making that result from granting too much influence from special interests) (p. 76).

These challenges are exacerbated in networked and distributed organizations. Pang et al.'s (2006) research at a multinational corporation revealed 'a deep divide in attitude, expectation, and style between what practitioners and the dominant coalition regarded as necessary and sufficient measures in crisis planning' (p. 371). Corporate communication, in this research, was relegated to an auxiliary status, 'a necessary evil rather than a critical tool' (p. 380), restricting the ability of the communication director to persuade the dominant coalition and gain its support. These findings echo arguments about the role of corporate culture in affecting crisis outcomes (e.g., Deverell & Olsson, 2010; Penrose, 2000).

Additionally, the infinite number of possible crisis scenarios including transboundary crises in a global, interconnected, landscape complicate an already volatile situation. In a scenario of incomplete and uncertain information, fully predicting or preventing a crisis may be challenging if not impossible. As an example, a World Health Organization (WHO) report (see Boseley, 2021) has now designated COVID-19 a 'preventable disaster' with 'weak links at every point in the chain' from inconsistent preparation to a 'slow and meek' alert system, lack of 'global political leadership,' and 'geopolitical tensions' among others. Especially telling is the authors' assertion that recommendations from previous crises were ignored and '...sit gathering dust in UN basements and on government shelves...' (Ibid).

Against this backdrop, understanding how practitioners in the field approach crisis planning and what they consider constraining and enabling factors assumes urgency. Further, the argument that crises can be an opportunity for organizational learning and training, organizational reform, and policy adaptation (Boin et al., 2016) warrants identifying the gaps, if any, between research and practice of crisis planning.

3 | METHOD

To have an in-depth understanding of the dynamics of crisis planning (prevention and preparation), we interviewed 11 German corporate communication professionals with extensive crisis management experience. Interviewees spanned different sectors (e.g., pharmaceuticals, financial services, telecommunications) and represented a variety of positions/designations. On average, participants had 22 years of experience in corporate communication (ranging from 37 to 2,5 years) with specific expertise in crisis management. Participants

identified as female (5) and male (6) with an average age of 47 years. Table 1

A combination of purposive and snowball sampling was employed. Requests for participation were shared online (e.g., LinkedIn) and acquaintances in one of the authors' professional networks were approached. For maximum variability, the goal was to recruit senior communication professionals with experience in crisis management across business sectors. Three participants from the professional network of one of the authors responded positively to the call. Additional participants were recruited from the calls for participation and included in the study if they met the necessary conditions. All participants were requested to suggest additional interviewees resulting in a total of 19 professionals approached, of which 11 eventually participated in the interviews. Participants came from corporate environments, primarily large organizations, although some of them had prior agency experience.

Interviews were conducted virtually (using Zoom or Microsoft Teams) between March and May 2022 and lasted an average of 55 min, the longest being 74 min and the shortest 40 min. Interviews were recorded, conducted in German by one of the authors who is German and translated into English. All participants signed informed consent forms. Interviewees choose to remain anonymous given the sensitivities involved in sharing cases and experiences from their current or previous employers (see Pang et al., 2006). To protect participants' identities, we provided them with participant codes (P1-P11).

Semi-structured interviews began with questions to build rapport and trust with participants delving into their experience in the field of corporate communication, position in the organization, and experience with crisis management. More

TABLE 1 Participant profile.

Participant code	Sex	Position	Industry/business sector	Professional experience
P1	Male	Director Corporate Communications	Telecommunication	21 years
P2	Male	Former Head of Corporate Communications, since 2022 Corporate Communications Consultant	Technology	37 years
P3	Male	Head of Staff Unit Crisis Communications	Chemical	33 years
P4	Female	Head of Corporate Press and Internal Communications	Real estate	20 years
P5	Male	Head of Corporate Communications and Media Relations	Chemical	30 years
P6	Male	Division Manager Corporate Communications	Retail	24 years
P7	Female	Communications and Marketing Director	Management consulting	12 years
P8	Male	Head of Media Relations	Chemical	20 years
P9	Female	Internal Communications Officer	Retail	2,5 years
P10	Female	Global Head of Content Strategy and Cross Channel Campaign Management	Real estate	20 years
P11	Female	Senior Vice President Corporate Communications and Marketing	Financial services	30 years

focused questions included perspectives on the state of crisis planning in their respective organizations, situational, organizational, or other factors facilitating or impeding crisis planning, practices that (did not) work, as well as an outlook on the future of the field. The semi-structured and open-ended nature of the interviews allowed flexibility for spontaneous follow-up questions and additional remarks from participants.

Interviews were transcribed following a thematic analysis approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006) well-suited to investigate how individuals give meaning to their experiences and how the context influences this experience. Two authors including the native German speaker carefully read and reread the English transcripts taking care to retain contextual cues and nuance while accounting for the diversity of organizational experience among our interviewees. Following preliminary coding, all three authors engaged in an iterative process to finetune and name themes, remaining mindful to privilege participant voices. Next, we explicate the findings from our interviews.

4 | RESULTS

4.1 | Crisis planning in jeopardy?: The many faces of a crisis

Reflecting on the contemporary communication environment and its implications for crisis planning, interviewees argued that the changing nature of crises—largely attributed to the digitalization of communication and the proliferation of social media—makes crisis planning especially challenging.

At the outset, our participants differentiated between crisis 'prevention' and 'preparation' noting that *few, if any*, crises can be prevented: 'You can't always avoid everything' (P3) exemplified by others 'let's say the plane crashes with the management inside. That's a crisis you can't prevent' (P4).

Interviewees used the term 'fluid' to characterize the communication and business environment in which they operate. The speed and agility with which decisions have to be made, including a recognition of when something becomes a crisis may vary across business sector. "Crisis is every day" if you define crisis in a low-threshold way,' articulated our interviewee from the telecom sector, and continued, 'x million mobile phone customers, something always goes wrong somewhere...But everything that concerns grid failures in smaller regions or villages, or nationwide grid failures that only last 3 min, are not yet real crises for me' (P1). Another echoed the idea that not all industry-specific operational disruptions constitute a crisis. For example, an interviewee from the chemical industry noted that in 'dealing with dangerous substances...there are always minor problems' (P3).

Transcending the aforementioned industry/business sector dynamics, interviewees identified a set of common factors that characterize a modern-day crisis. These included visibility or 'when it

[crisis] sees the light of day' (P1), business disruption i.e., 'threatens our ability to do business' (P11), potential for escalation or 'domino effect' (P9) and '...massive reputation damage' (P5; P7; P10). Interviewees used these markers—individually or in combination—to characterize a crisis. As a case in point, a spillover effect on other stakeholders such as 'when the crisis floats into the clientele domain' (P6) and/or 'what does it look to the people outside' (P8) potentially embodied all crisis markers and demanded immediate action. Time pressure and legal implications were additional determinants in according crisis status to an event.

Interviewees further noted that crisis planning was especially challenging in the digital age. The question—'Are a few 100 tweets or a few 100 replies under a tweet somehow a crisis? No. But at some point it becomes one' (P5)—aptly illustrates the ambiguity that pervades crisis planning. Social and digital media were noted to perpetuate a volatile environment that was 'emotionally charged' (P6) and inhibited the 'the depth and the nature of a discussion' (P10). High levels of polarization evident in the 'black/white' view of social media communication (P6) and the ability of different actors to speak for, with, and on behalf of a business generates a perceived lack of control (P2) in the planning process. Especially for long-time practitioners used to different ways of working, these developments require a fundamental mindset shift:

15 years ago, I or my department were the only ones who talked about [company] in public, and usually via the gatekeeper press. That means I needed a network of a few journalists who occasionally reported on us in a nice or neutral way. Today I can only orchestrate that. I can no longer control anything. (P11).

The ubiquity of social media coupled with the frequency of crises often denies practitioners 'the luxury of blocking off 2 days and sitting down calmly to think' (P9). To be a meaningful exercise in such a volatile environment, crisis planning demands an organization-wide approach.

4.2 | A culture of organizational (un)preparedness

Good crisis management warrants what we call a culture of preparedness. A culture of preparedness was described by one participant as an 'insurance policy...that organizations pay for continuously, just in case. ... Because it [crisis] can always come. And it usually comes as a surprise. That's why you have to think about it in your day-to-day business' (P9).

Reflecting on the state of organizational preparedness, interviewees identified four factors that complicate crisis planning. These relate to peacetime stakeholder relations, the need for leadership attuned to crisis sensitization, a strategic role for communication, and intra- and interdepartmental coordination. Together, these factors contribute to an organization-wide approach toward crisis planning.

4.2.1 | Precrisis relationship management

Be it with the media, NGOs, or associations, cultivating Precrisis relationships with these and other stakeholder groups was repeatedly noted as the basis for crisis planning. Not doing so, noted interviewees, was a lost opportunity. Preparing for a crisis 'when the sun is shining' (P2) enables organizations to think clearly and lucidly. In the context of media relations, this translates to fostering reliable relationships that 'prevent them from just jumping on your back without having at least called you first' (P1) and open up a chance to explain: 'When you call a journalist for the first time or they call you when there has already been some kind of explosion, you have never been able to build up a sustainable relationship with them' (P1).

Aside from the media, interviewees were especially cognizant of ongoing relationship management with employees. To some, building a trusting and transparent relationship with employees centering on open communication was the 'be all and end-all' (P9). Creating trustworthy employee relationships, participants argued, needed to be embedded in an organizational culture in which employee engagement and involvement could assist with 'early recognition' of impending problems (P10) and/or a supportive employee community in the event of a crisis (P8). To illustrate, an interviewee recounted their organization's commitment to dialogue and proactive communication, from regularly posting FAQs based on questions compiled from across the organization (P5) to surveys as a mechanism to pulse-check stakeholder sentiment (P4; P8). That said, the degree of 'entrepreneurial courage' (P4) organizational members have to signal impending trouble rested to a large extent on the communication environment and leadership in the organization.

4.2.2 | Leadership in the crisis context

The role of organizational leaders and crisis leaders, more broadly, was cited as a key deterrent as well as an enabler to crisis planning. Speaking to the role of leaders and leadership, developing and sustaining such a corporate culture is contingent on whether the executive leadership has a 'radar for potentially critical situations' (P5) or an openness to 'talk about problems and how we approach them, how we try to solve them' (P2). Interviewees acknowledged that the majority of organizations have come a long way to giving due attention to potential issues that could turn into a crisis (P11) and attributed the change in large part to the COVID-19 pandemic that compelled organizations to appreciate the need to keep stakeholders informed and engaged.

Although business specifics are decisive, e.g., 'the topic of safety is so deeply rooted in the chemical industry' (P3), personal/individual mindsets can hinder or facilitate such a culture. A few referenced a 'prevention paradox' that might derail leaders from attending to crisis planning explaining, 'if you prepare super well

for the crisis, the crisis might not happen because you have prepared well. And then there are people who say, "Yeah, now we've done all this shit. Nothing happened"' (P2). Such thinking may make organizations complacent and cause them to be blindsided should a crisis strike; therefore, crisis sensitization is argued to be crucial more so in current times characterized by constant change and transformation (P10; P3). In an ideal state and aligned with the idea of a culture of preparedness, many stressed the need to go beyond the individual leader and embed these values in organizational culture involving all stakeholders (P7).

4.2.3 | The role of/for communication

A leadership attuned to crisis planning was also defined by its attitude toward the communication department. Notably, interviewees opined that although 'crisis is always part of a communication job' (P2), the communication function often has 'no possibility to *prevent* corporate crises, because you don't make any corporate decisions' (P8; italics original). Citing the centrality of communication in crisis planning, interviewees argued that an organizational approach to crisis planning needed to give communication managers a seat at the decision-making table. Good crisis planning and crisis management meant the highest levels of confidence in the communication function: 'Does a board of directors want to be advised by its communication department? Or do they see it more as "the little team that is located somewhere between marketing and the guest toilet?"' (P5). The position of the communication function in the organization was perceived as crucial to crisis preparedness so much so that 'if communication has a question, it must be answered' (P8).

Interviewees noted that this acknowledgement of the communication function was not universal and often a detriment to crisis planning ("if the importance of communication is not really recognized, then it is too late in the crisis anyway"; P5). Simultaneously, interviewees reiterated that communication managers needed to engage in measures to '...communicate the topic, bring it into the meetings, get it into the heads of the employees, do training, show how seriously this issue is being taken' (P3). Taking the lead in bringing issues to the 'board table' may allow communication managers to prevent a 'chain of catastrophes from top management who may only have business on their minds' (P1).

In sum, interviewees argued that having a 'safety culture' (P2) required organizational leaders to commit to crisis preparedness and, relatedly, to accord communication managers a seat at the decision-making table. These twin factors were described as complementing and adding weight to ongoing, tactical, trainings and mitigation efforts as 'exemplified or desired' (P3) from top management and/or to signal that these efforts had a 'good anchoring within the company' (P4).

4.2.4 | Working across functional silos

Even when interviewees situated communication at the core of an organization-wide effort, as having 'overall responsibility in the event of a crisis' (P3) and/or as one of the few specialist functions that jointly participated in crisis planning, they recognized the need to work across organizational silos and make crisis planning 'everyone's business.' From the legal team, facilities management, board members, corporate/plant security, to financial controllers, or the 'works council' (P6) analytics and IT (P8, P9), relevant departments and functional areas need to be included in crisis planning.

A coordinated approach to crisis planning makes it imperative to 'bring along' other departments and functional areas. Such goals are often impeded by internal politics and 'tussles over competence' (P2). The absence of an integrated approach results in limited accountability and finger-pointing especially in the aftermath of a crisis '...when it goes into certain kingdoms, the "kings" somehow say "No, no, but that [responsibility] was with him"' (P1). Having clear roles—before a crisis—and being accountable and responsible for those is important for quick resolution and/or to prevent an escalation. Precrisis role clarity also ensures an intra-organizational network that can be quickly mobilized in a crisis situation.

Indeed, a networked approach was seen as decisive to crisis resolution and mitigation of undesirable outcomes, instilling a sense of urgency and common goals even in organizations that may otherwise be slow to act:

In companies like [...] the mills grind really slowly until something happens. In the crisis, fortunately, it's completely different. All these walls are torn down and you get quick decisions, you get constructive decisions. Everyone definitely does their best. Everyone is in the same boat. (P11).

4.3 | Navigating structure and agility: Crisis planning as (ongoing) process

A final theme we identified speaks to the pragmatics of crisis planning and balance between accumulated learning from past crises and 'the new normal' (P8). In line with extant wisdom which emphasizes the need for (pre-)crisis planning (e.g., Coombs, 2014), our interviewees reinforced the need for scenario planning, crisis monitoring, simulations and training arguing the need to remain alert and have processes in place. Consider this example: 'Hey, this could happen tomorrow. So that you simply get routine in these processes. The crisis doesn't wait for me. So in the end, a team has to be able to deal with such situations' (P10).

At the same time, participants emphasized that modern-age crisis management called for a balance between structure and agility whereby structure was defined in terms of existing processes of crisis

planning as an ongoing activity, and agility was defined in terms of being able to make decisions in the moment, to pivot, and to be prepared for anything. This balance suggests that crisis planning entails continually learning and unlearning. An apt illustration came from our interviewee in the technology sector who noted that 'tools for managing a crisis have evolved considerably. We have to check this again and again, and we also have to do rehearsals' (P2) but explained that staying prepared at all times meant exercising agility:

I am not a big fan of ready-made press releases for all and every situation...before I waste years writing blueprint press releases, of which 99.9 percent will never be used, I prefer to focus on processes and structures that need to be in place when the crisis hits. (P2)

Another interviewee shared a good practice that combined the everyday tasks of crisis planning with thinking about emergent challenges:

We have a crisis jour fixe every week where the communicators on the call list meet and share what have we learned. But once a month, we also work through [novel] tasks together... It could happen that we get completely new impulses [and] think how will we deal with it? (P8)

Others echoed the balance arguing that just preparing crisis manuals as a one-off, static, exercise was futile: '...everything you don't practice, you forget' (P11). Instead, a pragmatic, agile, approach was necessary to take on situations that lack precedence. Noting the impossibility of predicting and planning for every possible situation, an interviewee asked: 'in a case where I have to announce that we have just lost ten colleagues [...] how are you going to practice that?' (P6) and went on to argue that what was needed was 'clearly coordinated processes and people who know what to do in whatever situation, which channels to use' (P6).

Additionally, interviewees were emphatic that dealing with crises, whether entirely unprecedented or not, requires crisis practitioners to remain calm and composed (P4, P5, P6, P7, P8, P11). Crisis planning, interviewees opined, could fall into disarray, if 'you fall into crisis mode yourself' (P7). As with crisis planning, professional practice in becoming comfortable with ambiguities and uncertainties may help practitioners better deal with and 'bring calmness' in trying situations (P11).

We contend that these perspectives on balancing structure and agility do not constitute an either/or nor do they suggest altogether abandoning planning exercises. Having pre-established 'basics' is the pre-cursor to an agile and calm mindset that allows crisis managers to remain alert and resilient in a crisis. Developing these twin capabilities starts in the Precrisis phase, as captured in the advice, 'master your craft ...in your normal, everyday business' (P6).

5 | DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Our exploratory study addresses the question of why businesses fall short in crisis planning despite evidence that doing so constitutes the first, critical, step of crisis management? This question is well-aligned with the call to focus attention on pre-crises, 'risk assessment and diagnosing crisis vulnerabilities' (Coombs & Laufer, 2018, p. 202). In contrast to the more visible crisis response and communication strategies, Precrisis decisions and processes remain obscured or emerge only in hindsight. Taken together, our results point to a multi-level and intertwined understanding of what impedes (and enables) crisis planning in organizations.

First, in response to the research question, our results illuminate a multiplicity of factors that impede crisis planning starting with the ambiguity of what defines a crisis and/or when something becomes a crisis. Our study makes clear that the notions and perceptions of what constitutes a crisis are not fixed in today's highly complex communication environment (Bauman & Bordoni, 2014; Bauman, 2000) making it difficult to fully *prevent* crises. Interviews with communication professionals in Germany elucidate that crisis planning in the contemporary communication environment is complex. A digital environment characterized by polarization, perceived loss of control, crisis frequency and types of crises challenges crisis planning and demands new ways of working. Preparing for all emergent situations triggered especially by and in social media is extremely hard, and, paradoxically, the impetus for effective planning.

Even when the threat to reputation and business disruption are reported as the biggest red flags, the rapidly changing forms of crises to which organizations may be exposed reinforces the complexities of a modern crisis that defy easy categorization owing to their 'interconnected and essentially unbounded nature' (e.g., Fischbacher-Smith & Adekola, 2022, p. 228). This urges organizations to be permanently on standby for any emerging crisis and to play through a wide range of 'what-if-scenarios.'

As a result, practitioners need to review and reflect on what constitutes a crisis in the current business and communication landscape. Doing so is important because crisis characteristics of 'threat, urgency, and uncertainty are not necessarily objective' and different actors, by virtue of their 'roles, responsibilities, values, interests, expertise, and experiences' may differ in their perception of the same crisis events (Boin et al., 2016, p. 7). In other words, how crises are 'interpreted, defined, and labeled as such' (Gigliotti, 2020, p. 571) is 'because of the ways in which people perceive the situation' (p. 567) necessitating that crisis planning be an organization-wide exercise.

Second, our results point to organizational factors that impede crisis planning, specifically, the absence of peacetime stakeholder relations, lack of (crisis) leadership, and siloed approaches to crisis planning with a limited role for the communication function. Given the host of organizational impediments, we contend that organizations need a comprehensive crisis planning approach embedded in an organizational culture of preparedness. Crisis planning needs to be

ongoing, proactive, (Lee, 2020) and integrated into a long-term strategy that is part of the culture of the organization rather than an ad hoc activity (Elsubbaugh et al., 2004). Doing so warrants a 'collective managerial "mindfulness"' (Bundy et al., 2017, p. 1667) and the resilience to 'absorb shocks and adapt [...] transform itself to be better prepared for future crises' (Nakrošis & Bortkevičiūtė, 2022, p. 297).

In practical terms, a culture of preparedness starts with building trustworthy stakeholder relations in peacetime. (Precrisis) relationship management is long established as the core of the public relations function (e.g., Cutlip et al., 1994). Although positive stakeholder relations can help identify and mitigate risks, extant scholarship and practice adopts a fragmented and siloed approach bifurcating stakeholder relations into 'external' and 'internal' (Bundy et al., 2017). Here, our study finds that crisis communication managers have a vital role in the first line of defense by facilitating an integrative approach including all relevant stakeholders (e.g., Frandsen & Johansen, 2011). Working across stakeholder groups and collaboration among functional areas is acknowledged to fill knowledge, competence, and resource gaps in crisis management (Nakrošis & Bortkevičiūtė, 2022). Having a seat at the decision-making table and working alongside strategic actors and organizational leadership, crisis managers have the opportunity to (co-) lead a culture of preparedness based on shared sensemaking 'to create mutual understanding of what is happening, what it means, and what must be done' (Riggio & Newstead, 2023, p. 212).

Finally, our results highlight that crisis planning is complicated by the necessity to maintain a balance between structure on the one hand and adaptability and agility on the other. To this end, although crisis plans remain important, simply making crisis plans as a one-time activity without continually practicing and/or adapting them to new/emergent situations is ineffectual. While prior experience and accumulated wisdom remain relevant and 'can influence sensemaking about new situations and events' (Riggio & Newstead, 2023, p. 211), organizations need to equally plan for the unthinkable crises by developing 'strategic foresight' (Scoblic, 2020) and constantly reappraising future possibilities to 'map ever-shifting territory' (Ibid). In pragmatic terms, this necessitates that crisis planning account for myriad scenarios and possible crisis types and requires practitioners to expand their spectrum beyond what is 'known' or familiar (Gigliotti, 2020).

Based on these results, crisis communication practitioners can benefit from the following key take-aways: 1) Cultivate a culture of preparedness in the organization where crisis planning is an ongoing activity; 2) Engage in precrisis relationship management with relevant stakeholders; 3) Claim a seat at the management/board table and play a significant role in decision-making processes; 4) Encourage an organization-wide approach as opposed to a siloed view to crisis planning; and 5) Balance structure with agility (e.g., continue investing in scenario planning and trainings but remain flexible to modify strategies where needed). Overall, then, our analysis supports a view of crisis planning as a complex and culturally contextualized organizational

and managerial process of prevention and preparedness embedded in organizational culture.

6 | LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Our research has some important limitations which also offer pertinent opportunities for additional investigation. We focus on the German context with practitioners from majority large companies. Although the contextual focus has advantages, we acknowledge the limits of transferability to other contexts. A larger, possibly cross-cultural, sample is beneficial to both validate our results and illuminate additional considerations that impede crisis planning. Moreover, the dynamics and processes of crisis planning in other organizations (e.g., small and medium business, non-profit, public sector) is worthy of investigation. Given the focus of the special issue, categorizing participant perspectives by industry sector was not a goal of our study but it may yield important points of convergence and divergence that could further add to this line of enquiry.

Our sample may also be critiqued for focusing on crisis communication professionals. Given their pivotal role in crisis planning, giving communication managers a seat at the table is recommended for effective crisis planning. However, we acknowledge as do our interviewees that effective crisis planning and crisis management, more broadly, needs to bring together relevant departments and functional areas. To this end, future research could include members from cross-functional areas to examine the challenges and processes of crisis planning from different vantage points. Doing so necessitates closer collaboration between researchers and organizations including access to key decision makers and opportunities to share knowledge (gaps).

Finally, focusing on leaders' roles in crisis mitigation and preparedness in addition to the extant focus on crisis response and postcrisis learning, is a promising avenue for future research. While crisis leadership is a nascent topic (for exceptions, see Boin et al., 2016; Riggio & Newstead, 2023), 'the increasing frequency and complexity of crises ...and impossibility of establishing plans and processes for every possible crisis' (Riggio & Newstead, 2023, p. 202) translates to a crucial need for leadership. However, leaders too need crisis sensitization and training and must facilitate an open communication environment that allows a multidirectional communication flow including the ability to safely signal impending crises. How leaders foster intra-organizational coordination, break down silos, and/or manage political agendas and internal struggles in creating a culture of preparedness, and how these preparatory efforts contribute to organizational resilience are questions worthy of investigation.

In conclusion, our paper argues that although the validity of being prepared for a crisis remains foundational, the approach(es) to it need(s) to be revisited in light of contemporary developments. Crisis planning centered on a culture of preparedness can help organizations leverage accumulated wisdom and open new vistas

that enable them to adapt to and address emerging challenges (Coombs, 2015).

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Interview data gathered and analyzed in this study are not publicly available to ensure participant confidentiality and anonymity.

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