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Leader culpability, hopelessness, and learning during organizational crises

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to investigate followers' judgments of leader culpability and learning during a crisis, and the extent to which judgments of culpability create hopelessness and reduce crisis learning. The authors also study factors that moderate these relationships.

Design/methodology/approach – Using the survey method the authors collected data from 354 individuals from a nonprofit organization that filed for bankruptcy. Respondents' comments also provided qualitative data that was used to triangulate the findings.

Findings – The authors find that followers made judgments of leader culpability and reported crisis learning. However, followers' judgments have no direct effect on their crisis learning, but have an indirect effect by increasing hopelessness. The authors also find that followers' job satisfaction and perceptions of sufficient crisis communications moderate this relationship. The qualitative data provides insights into the areas on which leaders were judged, and what was learned during the crisis.

Research limitations/implications – More research on internal stakeholders' judgments of their leaders during organizational crises is important as they affect followers' psychological states and behaviors. Future research can test the findings in a longitudinal study.

Practical implications – Leaders need to pay attention to the judgments of their followers during a crisis as they could foster hopelessness and reduce learning. Providing sufficient crisis communications and enabling job satisfaction could lessen these negative effects.

Originality/value – Extant research tends to focus on the judgments of external stakeholders during crises. This study is one of the first to examine the effects of internal stakeholders' judgments of leader culpability on their sense of hopelessness and crisis learning, and the moderating factors that reduce their negative effects. The authors also contribute to understanding what aspects of leadership are judged by followers during a crisis, and what followers learn from a crisis. These are areas that have not been previously examined in crisis management research. The authors also provide evidence from individuals in an actual organization in crisis which tends not to be the norm in crisis attribution and crisis learning research.

Keywords Communication, Leadership, Learning, Crisis, Job satisfaction, Attribution, Hopelessness

Paper type Research paper

During organizational crises stakeholders, such as the media, government agencies, community groups, the general public, employees, and other relevant individuals, often make judgments as to whether the focal organization and its leaders are culpable for creating or mishandling a crisis situation. Judgments of responsibility are important in these situations as they enable individuals to make sense of a negative situation (Weiner, 1985). However, these judgments could have significant negative



consequences for organizations and their leaders who are found to be culpable. For instance, crises such as the Toyota product recalls and the BP oil spill resulted in external stakeholders initiating lawsuits, protests, boycotts, and negative press against the organizations in crisis.

What are often less visible and less understood during a crisis are the effects of judgments of responsibility on those making the judgments, particularly in the case of internal stakeholders. For instance research on judgments of responsibility, in contexts other than organizational crises, finds that those judging others as being responsible for a negative behavior experience anger and a desire for punishment (Weiner, 1995), lowered affective commitment (Moore, 2000), loss of trust (Tomlinson and Mayer, 2009), and a sense of hopelessness (Abramson *et al.*, 1989). Such effects on the attitudes and behaviors of employees and other internal stakeholders, who judge their leaders as being culpable for creating a crisis situation, could severely inhibit their organizations' crisis recovery efforts. Most research on stakeholder judgments during organizational crises, however, has primarily focussed on the judgments of external stakeholders, and the importance of impression management in responding to these judgments (e.g. Coombs, 2007; Marcus and Goodman, 1991; Wise, 2004). Those studies of internal stakeholders' judgments have focussed on the factors that contribute to judgments of responsibility (e.g. Brown and White, 2011; Schwarz, 2012), and how followers may attribute charisma to their leaders during a crisis (e.g. Halverson *et al.*, 2004; Hunt *et al.*, 1999). The effects on followers' attitudes and behaviors, such as crisis learning, when the "romance of leadership" (Bligh *et al.*, 2011) is tarnished as they judge their leaders to be culpable for a crisis situation have received limited research attention.

Followers' learning behaviors are particularly important for organizations trying to successfully recover from a crisis (Kovoor-Misra and Nathan, 2000; Pearson and Mitroff, 1993). A crisis may call into question organizational assumptions and reveal the dysfunctional elements that were involved in causing the crisis (Kovoor-Misra and Nathan, 2000). Internal stakeholders' willingness and efforts to learn from the crisis are critical for strengthening the organization, and leaders play a key role in this process as they focus attention on the repair and transformation of the organization (Kahn *et al.*, 2013). However, if leaders are judged by their followers to be responsible for creating or mishandling the crisis situation it could affect their followers' motivation to learn. In some instances, leaders who are deemed to be problematic may be removed from the organization in crisis. In other cases, such as in the Toyota product recall crisis, leaders may continue to lead their organizations even though they may be perceived to be at fault. In these latter cases, it is important to understand the effects of followers' judgments of their leaders on their motivations to learn. Such understanding could broaden our knowledge of the dynamics that occur within organizations during a crisis, and deepen insights into how internal stakeholders could be better managed so that they can contribute to their organizations' crisis recovery efforts.

This paper describes our study of how followers' judgments of their leaders as being culpable for creating an organizational crisis affects the extent to which they learn from the crisis. We also examine the role of hopelessness in influencing this relationship. Hopelessness is one of the outcomes of attributions (Abramson *et al.*, 1989). Research finds that if individuals are in a lower status than an offender they are less likely to seek revenge even if they judge them to be responsible for an offense (e.g. Aquino *et al.*, 2001). Therefore we believe that, because of followers' lower status relative to their leaders, hopelessness is an important mediating variable to be studied. The roles of hopelessness in generating cynicism toward organizational change

(e.g. Wanous *et al.*, 1994), and as an outcome of discrimination (e.g. Deitch *et al.*, 2003) have been acknowledged in the management literature. However, the role of hopelessness in influencing learning during organizational crises has not been examined. Finally, to better understand the complexities associated with followers' hopelessness in this context, we also examine factors that could moderate this relationship. Positive attitudes and access to information have been associated with coping effectiveness in stressful situations (e.g. Folkman, 1984; Schweiger and Denisi, 1991). We study the roles of followers' job satisfaction and their perception that the crisis communications that they are receiving are sufficient in reducing their sense of hopelessness. We next discuss our model.

Model

Figure 1 depicts our hypothesized model. We discuss each of the specified relationships below.

Judgments of responsibility and learning

Organizational crises are uncertain, ambiguous, and threatening events (Pearson and Clair, 1998) that could result in a collapse in individuals' sensemaking (Weick, 1993). In these situations, individuals seek to regain meaning by understanding why it occurred, and who may be responsible for creating the negative and disruptive situation (Weiner, 1985). Such understanding defines the problem situation for individuals and facilitates coping and adaptation (Folkman, 1984; Weiner, 1985). The process of judging whether leaders of organizations in crisis are responsible for the negative situations is a complex task. This is because there is ambiguity and uncertainty in terms of the causes and the effects of crises (Pearson and Clair, 1998). Further, it could be ongoing and dynamic as new information becomes available, and individuals who are being judged try to shape perceptions through strategies such as confessions, justifications, apologies, excuses, and denial (Hargie *et al.*, 2010; Weiner, 1995). In addition, the judgment-making process could be rational as stakeholders assess relevant factors associated with the individual and the situation (Weiner, 1995), or it could be flawed by errors (Kelley, 1973). Some factors that individuals focus on in making these judgments are the extent to which leader' behaviors are distinctive from their other previous behaviors, consistent with past behaviors, and if there is consensus in that others in the same situation would behave similarly (Kelley, 1973; Schwarz, 2012). Individuals could also take into account if the cause was

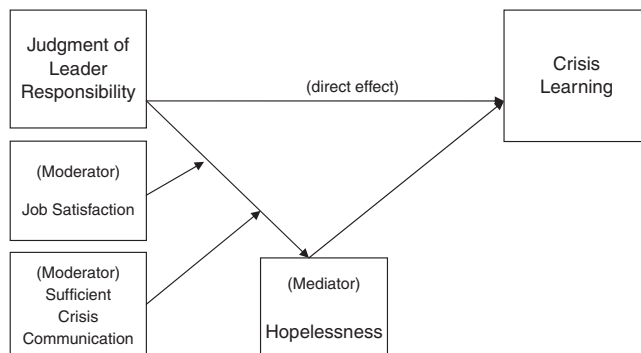


Figure 1.
Hypothesized model of the effects of judgments of leader responsibility on crisis learning and hopelessness

controllable, stable, and global (Weiner, 1985; 1995). Behaviors that are perceived to be low in distinctiveness and consensus and high in consistency and controllability tend to be attributed to internal factors and the person is believed to be responsible for their behaviors (Schwarz, 2012).

Weiner (1995) differentiates between judgments of responsibility and blame. He suggests that blame is an outcome of judgments of responsibility for a negative event, and the degree to which one blames another depends on the impact and consequence of the negative event. Judgments of responsibility have a range of other consequences for the individuals making the judgments, and for the target that is being judged. For instance, if individuals judge others to be responsible it could evoke anger and a desire for punishment (Jeong, 2009; Weiner, 1985), revenge (Aquino *et al.*, 2001), and in other cases hopelessness (Abramson *et al.*, 1989). In contrast, if a target is viewed as being less responsible for a negative situation it could evoke sympathy, helping behaviors, and support (Jeong, 2010; Rudolph *et al.*, 2004; Weiner, 1995). Our study extends research on the effects of judgments of responsibility by examining some of its effects in an organizational crisis context. We specifically examine the effects of judgments of responsibility on the extent to which individuals learn during an organizational crisis. These situations are significant and complex, and there is much for individuals to learn as to how they are caused and can be better managed (Kovoor-Misra and Nathan, 2000; Pearson and Mitroff, 1993). This is because organizational crises often lay bare the dysfunctional aspects of organizational functioning and reveal how individuals work and think (Kahn *et al.*, 2013). For instance, in the BP oil spill crisis poor safety procedures and poor government oversight were found to be factors that led to the crisis (Rotemberg, 2011). Prior to a crisis, many of these problems may go unnoticed or be rationalized by members of the organization. However, the disruptive nature of a crisis often forces organizational members to confront these issues and learn from them (Madsen and Desai, 2010). Therefore, crises can foster higher level learning as individuals change frames of reference (Fiol and Lyles, 1985), or engage in unlearning (Nystrom and Starbuck, 1984). Learning results in changes in individuals' cognitive schemas (Fiol and Lyles, 1985), and may be institutionalized within organizations in the form of policies and procedures (Elliott and Macpherson, 2010; Madsen and Desai, 2010).

Judgments that their leaders are responsible for creating a crisis situation for their organizations, however, could serve as a barrier to learning. For instance, some of the barriers to learning during a crisis include: distractions created by various factors in the crisis situation, cognitive narrowing where opportunities for learning are missed, and a lack of corporate responsibility (Smith and Elliott, 2007). Judgments that their leaders are culpable during a crisis could distract follower's attention away from learning, and diminish their motivation to learn. For instance, in the context of negative press and as external stakeholders judge these same top managers, internal stakeholders could be distracted and focussed on information pertaining to their leaders' role in causing the crisis. Further, there may be investigations and lawsuits that need to be managed. Therefore, followers could be less attentive to other targets that could be a source of learning, such as failed processes and systems, and opportunities for learning could be missed. In contrast, we expect that individuals who judge their leaders to be less responsible for a crisis to be sympathetic to their leaders (Weiner, 1995). We expect them to be motivated to understand either how to avoid these crisis situations in the future, or how to better respond to them. They will be less

distracted and better able to focus on opportunities for learning and prevention. This discussion leads to the following hypothesis:

- H1.* Individuals who judge their leaders to be more responsible for causing a crisis situation will be less likely to learn from the crisis, than individuals who judge them to be less responsible.

The mediating role of hopelessness

Hopelessness is one of the outcomes of attributions (e.g. Abramson *et al.*, 1989; Deitch *et al.*, 2003). Individuals tend to experience hopelessness in situations that are perceived to be highly significant and have negative consequences, and where the causes are perceived to be stable or enduring, and global in that they could affect a range of outcomes (Abramson *et al.*, 1989; Weiner, 1985). These situations tend to evoke hopelessness because individuals feel helpless and lack personal control in changing the negative outcomes, and also because they perceive their future to be bleak (Abramson *et al.*, 1989; Weiner, 1985). Situations where leaders are perceived by their followers to be responsible for causing or mishandling a crisis have many of the characteristics of situations that lead to hopelessness. First, an organizational crisis is significant for internal stakeholders because it could threaten the survival and goals of their organizations, and it has a number of negative consequences. In addition, followers may perceive the cause of the crisis situation to be stable and global as they continue to be dependent on leaders who they perceive to be culpable, and who have the power to affect many of their important outcomes. As a result, followers in these situations could feel trapped and experience a loss of personal control, and they could perceive that the future for their organization is bleak as they continue to be led and managed by these leaders. Therefore, we expect followers who perceive that their leaders are more responsible for causing the organizational crisis situation to experience more hopelessness than individuals who perceive that they are less responsible.

We also expect that the degree of hopelessness, experienced by followers who judge their leaders to be responsible for the crisis, to affect their motivations to learn. Hopelessness results in a lack of motivation, apathy, and low energy where nothing that the individual does matters, and it can foster sadness as the individual perceives that the future is bleak (Abramson *et al.*, 1989). Therefore, we expect that as individuals experience hopelessness they will feel it is pointless to invest resources in learning from the crisis situation as they perceive that the future of the organization is not positive. This discussion leads to the following hypotheses:

- H2.* Hopelessness will mediate the relationship between individuals' judgments of their leaders as being responsible for causing a crisis situation and their motivation to learn from the crisis.

The moderating role of job satisfaction

During negative events, individuals tend to appraise the potential for harm or loss, threat (future harm), and challenge; and they also assess the extent to which they have the necessary resources to cope with the situation (Folkman, 1984). In this process, the positive attitudes held by an individual could reduce the perception of threat and enhance the perception of being able to cope. Having favorable attitudes about one's job is often an indicator of well-being (Salanova *et al.*, 2012). Therefore, we expect that followers' job satisfaction will provide them with a sense of personal control during a crisis. They could view their jobs as a psychological and social resource, and it could

ground them during the disruption of the crisis. Further, these positive attitudes will also enable individuals to believe that the future for the organization is less bleak, and to focus on what is working in the organization. As a result, even if they judge the leaders of the organization as being responsible for creating a crisis situation, we expect individuals who are more satisfied with their jobs to be less hopeless during the crisis than those who are less satisfied. This discussion leads to the following hypothesis:

H3. Individuals' job satisfaction will moderate the relationship between their judgments of leader responsibility and their sense of hopelessness.

The moderating role of sufficient crisis communications

We also study the moderating effects of followers' perception that the crisis communications that they are receiving are sufficient. Communicating with internal stakeholders is a key task of leaders during a crisis (Argenti, 2002). This is because access to information could contribute to individuals' sense of perceived control (Averill, 1973), and reduce the uncertainty associated with ambiguous and uncertain situations (Wanberg and Banas, 2000). Even if the information is negative, receiving sufficient information on the what, why and when of the situation enables individuals to feel more in control and less helpless. For instance Schweiger and Denisi (1991), in the context of a merger, found that those employees who received regular updates experienced less uncertainty and perceived the organization as more trustworthy than those who received less information. Therefore, we expect that, even if individuals judge their leaders to be responsible for causing a crisis situation, having sufficient information on the negative situation will enable them to feel more in control and less hopeless. This discussion leads to the following hypothesis:

H4. Individuals' perceptions that the crisis communications that they are receiving are sufficient will moderate the relationship between their judgments of leader responsibility and their sense of hopelessness.

We next discuss the focal organization and the crisis that served as the context of our study.

Context of the study

The context of our study, was a three-year-old, not-for-profit, scientific organization that provided educational entertainment to its visitors. To protect the identity of the organization we refer to it as EduEntertain in this paper. EduEntertain was staffed by 628 employees and volunteers. The volunteers participated in all facets of the organization's core work such as providing tours and taking care of the exhibits. The organization had initial high attendance from the public. However, over time the number of customers declined and was less than projected. Therefore, EduEntertain had to file for Chapter 11 bankruptcy because it could not pay its debts to its bondholders and to the city from which it had received a loan. Prior to filing for bankruptcy there was concern about the future of the organization. This crisis was covered in the local media and there was negative media scrutiny throughout this process. There was some ambiguity as to who all were responsible for the crisis situation. For instance, the primary cause of the crisis was EduEntertain's inability to pay its debts. There was a perception that the leaders (founders and top managers) could have better handled the organization prior to the crisis, and during the negative publicity and the escalation of the crisis. Further, the media was perceived to be unfair

in its reporting, and there was a belief that the city could have done more to support the organization. Almost a year after filing for bankruptcy, EduEntertain was bought by a private entity. They changed EduEntertain's name but continued to support the educational and entertainment mission of the organization. We next discuss the methodology used in our study.

Methodology

We discuss our methodology in terms of our data collection methods, sample, and measures.

Data collection methods and sample

Approximately three months after the Chapter 11 filing for bankruptcy, we surveyed all 628 employees and volunteers. The surveys with return paid postage were mailed to all the volunteers and employees. We received 354 surveys for a response rate of 56.4 percent. Because there were missing data for some of the variables used in our analyzes, the number of observations for any one analysis ranged between $n = 337$ (53.7 percent) to $n = 342$ (54.5 percent).

Measures

In the survey, all items were measured on a seven point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree; 7 = strongly agree). We also provided space for the respondents to write-in comments so that they could explain their ratings and point of view. Below we describe the scales and the qualitative data that were used to measure our variables:

Judgments of responsibility. We measured individuals' perception that their leaders were responsible for the crisis by asking the question: "Focusing on the recent events that led to the Chapter 11 filing, to what extent do you think it was caused primarily by people who are a part of the organization, such as the founders or the top managers." We also compared some of the respondents' ratings with their write-in comments to assess support for construct validity. Table I presents some illustrative examples. For instance, respondents who found that their leaders to be culpable (score of 7) made comments such as "I'll put it simply get rid of the founder and EduEntertain will flourish they have made too many political enemies in the city and the state. Do us a favor and dump them" and "The founders are to blame for our initial downfall. The CEO continues to fail us." Those who strongly disagreed with the statement that the crisis was caused primarily by the leadership within the organization (score of 1) made comments such as "I perceive EduEntertain as a well run organization," and "I have been very impressed with the effort put into keeping the volunteers informed and happy." The qualitative data provide construct validity support for our quantitative measure.

Learning from the crisis. To measure this variable we reverse coded respondents answer to the question: "There was nothing new to learn from the organization's recent experiences." To assess support for construct validity, where possible, scale responses were compared to comments that indicated learning. The list below presents some representative comments from respondents reporting high crisis learning (score of 6 or 7). For instance, a respondent who was learning about their leaders' competence states, "Recent volunteer resignations and terminations speak very, very poorly about management. Very little has been done to save EduEntertain in the last several months." Another respondent who was learning about external stakeholders' perceptions comments "Because of the Chapter 11 filing, the standing of EduEntertain in the industry

Table I.
Qualitative data
support for
judgment of leader
responsibility scale

Scale score	Qualitative data
7	I'll put it simply get rid of the founder and EduEntertain will flourish they have made too many political enemies in the city and the state. Do us a favor and dump them!
7	The founders are to blame for our initial downfall. The CEO continues to fail us
7	Current upper management does not have the knowledge, expertise, experience, or drive to move EduEntertain ahead. If current upper management is left in place EduEntertain will not survive another year
7	Founder has no people skills! Or managerial skills. CEO doesn't seem to be able relate to the rank and file employees
7	Strongly needs (and deserves) a leader who knows how to inculcate the organization with a clear vision and get the organization to buy that vision
7	PR is very poor, and there is very little marketing and advertising, even before all the bad press regarding their finances
7	People at the top have no clue as to how to run a business
7	Has for too long been motivated by politics and donors and not enough by having a clear message and purpose
7	I believe the leaders burned many bridges in the city thus causing lack of support
7	Replacing the leader will help the volunteer and staff relationship
1	I perceive EduEntertain as a well run organization
1	I have been very impressed with the effort put into keeping the volunteers informed and happy

has fallen to nothing.” In a final example, a respondent who was learning about the impact of the crisis states, “The chapter 11 filing is a strain on many individuals due to the uncertainty of how to progress.” We find that the qualitative data provides construct validity support for our quantitative measure. The following are some comments of respondents who had high scores (6 or 7) on the crisis learning scale sorted by areas of crisis learning:

(1) Leaders' competence:

- “Recent volunteer resignations and terminations speak very, very poorly about management. Very little has been done to save EduEntertain in the last several months.”
- “The only people who really know what is going on is the Board. The rest of us including the CEO are pawns.”
- “Administration asks for but does not take good improvement suggestions from staff, volunteers, or members!!!”
- “Upper management weighs too heavily on how the organization chart looks and not what is needed to get the job done right.”

(2) Cause of the crisis:

- “EduEntertain will not improve till the CEO and some other Directors are all gone! They are the worst managers!”
- “EduEntertain does not understand its competition and what visitors want.”
- “EduEntertain doesn't know what it is or where it is going.”
- “Marketing of the business is poor.”

-
- (3) Perception of external stakeholders:
- “Because of the Chapter 11 filing, the standing of EduEntertain in the industry has fallen to nothing.”
 - “Many people think we are closed or will be closing.”
 - “The guests see that things are not staffed or organized.”
 - “Until they got media attention that they were closing some people didn’t know that EduEntertain existed.”
 - “Most people I talk to think EduEntertain is closed because of bankruptcy.”
- (4) Impact of the crisis on morale and work:
- “The chapter 11 filing is a strain on many individuals due to the uncertainty of how to progress.”
 - “I felt better about the future of EduEntertain for awhile but nothing has changed- I don’t believe I will have a job much longer. I am very frustrated that there is no sense of accomplishment. I feel as though the tasks/projects I begin are not finished because of lack of funds or support from the board.”
 - “Many of the staff are highly educated and motivated to learn more and expand themselves in this field. With the recent Chapter 11 filing many financial restraints have been put in place which has cut back on the creativity and experience possibilities of the staff.”
 - “EduEntertain used to be an enjoyable place to work, but now everyone is overworked and I see productivity and our image suffering.”
 - “Since the Chapter 11, EduEntertain seems like it’s on shaky ground, low morale, and a sense of inevitable doom.”
 - “EduEntertain has made great strides recently.”
 - “Improvements in marketing and staff/ volunteer relationships are taking place.”
- (5) Solutions for resolving the crisis:
- “Better communication from top management to all employees would ease the strain, as long as top management is direct and honest with the way they give the information.”
 - “There are more things that can be done to draw in repeat customers. More people need to know that there is more to see and learn at EduEntertain.”
 - “I have sensed an antipathy toward EduEntertain since its inception and effective PR still has not overcome that. Its ‘Mission’ needs to be clarified.”
 - “I feel there could be much more marketing done (and this has increased lately) especially to local residents to keep them coming back.”
 - “Entry level and upper management staff are not where staff is needed. It is the in-between that needs help.”
 - “A greater sense of ‘team’ needs to be developed amongst and between both the paid staff and volunteer staff.”

Hopelessness. Consistent with the dimensions of hopelessness identified by Abramson *et al.* (1989), we measured individual's sense of perceived control as they worked in EduEntertain, and their future expectations for EduEntertain. To measure perceived control we modified Pearlin and Schooler's (1978) seven item Mastery Scale to make it applicable for the organizational context. Respondents were asked "Focusing on the current situation at EduEntertain to what extent do you feel the following." Examples of items on this scale included: "I have little control over things that happen at EduEntertain," and "I often feel helpless in dealing with the problems at EduEntertain." To measure future expectations we modified Beck *et al.*'s (1974) five item Future Expectation scale to make it relevant to the organizational context. Examples of items from the scale included: "My future at EduEntertain seems vague and uncertain to me," and "My future at EduEntertain seems dark to me." The items revealed a single scale, with a Cronbach's α of 0.822.

Job satisfaction. This variable was measured using Cammann *et al.*'s (1983) three item Job Satisfaction scale. The Cronbach's α for this scale was 0.798. An example of an item from the scale is: "All in all I am satisfied with my job/volunteering activities."

Sufficient crisis communications. We developed a three item scale to measure this variable. The items included: first, "I feel the frequency of communication from the CEO is sufficient," second, "I am told what I need to know about EduEntertain," and third, "I am told what I need to know about my job." The Cronbach's α for this scale was 0.835.

Control variables. To avoid confounding effects, we controlled for several variables. We included in our analysis a dummy variable for gender (male = 0, female = 1), whether they were a paid employee (volunteer = 0, employee = 1), and whether they were a supervisor in the organization (no = 1, yes = 1). Additionally, we collected data on the respondent's tenure in the organization using a scale of less than one year, one-two years, and greater than two years. We converted these responses to dummy variables of short tenure (0 = greater than or equal to 1 year, 1 = less than 1 year), medium tenure (0 = less than 1 year or greater than 2 years, 1 = between 1 and 2 years), and long tenure (0 = less than or equal to 2 years, 1 = greater than 2 years). We entered short tenure and medium tenure into the equation, with the default being long tenure. Finally, we also controlled for an individual's organizational identification because it could affect individuals' learning and change behaviors during a crisis (Kovoor-Misra, 2009). We used six items from Mael and Tetrick's (1992) organizational identification scale. Some examples of items on the scale included: "When someone criticizes EduEntertain it feels like a personal insult" and "EduEntertain's successes are my successes." The scale had a Cronbach's α of 0.78.

Analysis and findings

The means, standard deviations and correlations among the variables are reported in Table II. The correlations show that several variables are strongly correlated. As one might expect, several of the independent variables are related to one another. To examine whether this might affect the findings, for each independent variable we calculated the variance inflation factors in each regression. The values ranged from 1.2 to 1.5, which is considerably below the cut-off of 10.0, suggesting that multicollinearity is not a problem with our results.

We find that the followers judged their leaders to be responsible for either causing or mishandling the crisis. On the Judgment of Responsibility scale the average response was 5.7 out of 7. These scores were also supported by the qualitative data. We compared

Table II.
Descriptive statistics
and correlations

Variables	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. Judgment of responsibility	5.70	1.50										
2. Learning from crisis	5.83	1.32	-0.05									
3. Hopelessness	4.26	0.99	0.37**	-0.12*								
4. Job Satisfaction	6.10	1.07	-0.23**	0.14*	-0.44**							
5. Sufficient crisis communication	4.87	1.53	-0.33**	0.07	-0.48**	0.48**						
6. Gender	0.59	0.49	-0.02	0.06	-0.01	0.08	0.02					
7. Employee	0.18	0.38	0.13*	0.05	0.32**	-0.24**	-0.43**	0.12*				
8. Supervisor	0.15	0.38	0.16**	0.01	0.12*	-0.16**	-0.18**	-0.02	0.12*			
9. Short tenure	0.17	0.38	-0.13**	0.06	-0.20**	0.03	0.02	0.08	0.10	-0.12*		
10. Medium tenure	0.19	0.40	-0.02	0.06	0.04	0.09	0.11*	-0.02	0.01	-0.12*	-0.22**	
11. Organizational identification	5.49	1.00	-0.11*	0.11*	-0.17**	0.30**	0.16**	0.17**	-0.03	0.03	-0.05	-0.03

Notes: $n = 337$; SD, standard deviation. * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$

respondents' write-in comments to their scores on the Judgment of Responsibility scale. We also analyzed the comments for categories and themes (Dutton and Dukerich, 1991) to identify some areas on which they may be judging their leaders. Analysis of the qualitative data suggests that some of the followers judged their leaders to be incompetent and lacking in abilities necessary for running a successful organization; as having poor relationships with their internal stakeholders, such as their staff; not building effective relationships with external stakeholders, such as city officials; and not doing enough in terms of marketing the organization. Table I provides some examples of comments made by employees and volunteers who judged their leaders as being responsible for creating or mishandling the crisis. For example, a comment made by a respondent who judged his/her leaders as being overall incompetent included:

Current upper management does not have the knowledge, expertise, experience, or drive to move EduEntertain ahead. If current upper management is left in place EduEntertain will not survive another year.

In terms of poor relationships that the leaders had with internal stakeholders, such as the staff, a respondent stated:

Founder has no people skills! Or managerial skills. CEO doesn't seem to be able relate to the rank and file employee.

In judging the leaders as not doing enough to build relationships with external stakeholders, such as city officials, a respondent commented:

I believe the leaders burned many bridges in the city thus causing a lack of support.

Finally, a respondent made the following statement regarding inadequate public relations and marketing:

PR is very poor, and there is very little marketing and advertising, even before all the bad press regarding their finances.

We also found that followers were learning from the crisis. On the Crisis Learning scale the average score was 5.83 out of 7. The qualitative data also provided evidence of

crisis learning. Respondents' comments were compared to their crisis learning scores. The comments of individuals who reported high scores on crisis learning (score of 6 or 7) were also analyzed to identify categories and areas of crisis learning. Analysis of the data suggests that followers were learning about: their leaders' competence; factors that could have contributed to the crisis; how the organization was perceived by external stakeholders; the impact of the crisis on morale and work; and solutions as to how the crisis could be resolved. The list above provides examples of comments that illustrate these areas of learning.

In testing our model, however, we find that Judgments of Leader Responsibility have no direct effect on Crisis Learning. *H1* proposed a negative relationship between these variables. Table III reports the results from the regression analysis. Model 1 includes just the control variables and Model 2 tests for the main effect. The results do not support *H1*. The inclusion of Judgment of Responsibility does not significantly predict Crisis Learning.

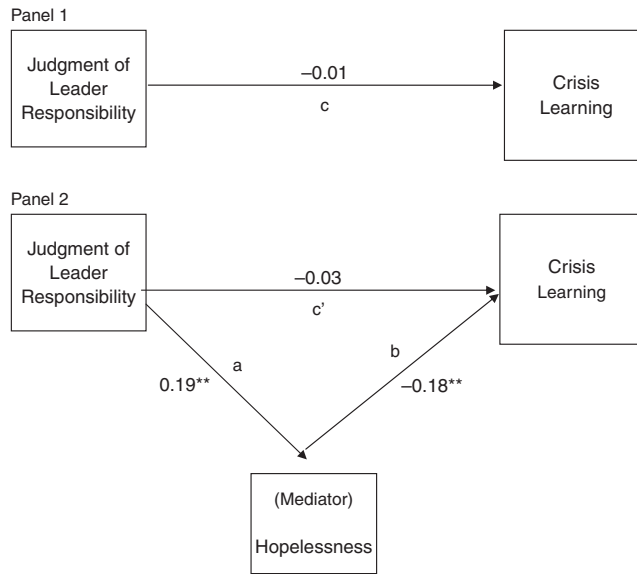
H2 argued that the relationship between Judgments of Leader Responsibility and Crisis Learning is mediated by Hopelessness. To test this hypothesis, we drew from Preacher and Hayes (2004; 2008) and used a bias-corrected bootstrapping approach to measure the indirect effect of Judgment of Responsibility on Crisis Learning as mediated by Hopelessness. Bootstrapping consists of taking multiple samples from the data set to estimate the effects in each re-sampled data set. The totality of the estimated effects permits the construction of a 95 percent confidence interval for the indirect effect size. If the range of the interval includes zero, the results suggest there is no significant effect. Our analysis used 5,000 samples and we report the bias-corrected intervals. The results appear in Figure 2 and Table IV. Figure 2 reports the direct relationship between Judgment of Responsibility and Crisis Learning and then the revised model when accounting for indirect effects. The first panel shows the direct relationship between Judgment of Responsibility and Crisis Learning, confirming the findings reported above, in Table III. In the second panel, there remains no direct effect of Judgment of Responsibility on Crisis Learning. However, Judgment of Responsibility significantly predicts Hopelessness, which in turns predicts Crisis Learning. Table IV reports the confidence interval tests from this analysis, showing a significant indirect

Variables	Control model Model 1		Main effect Model 2	
	<i>B</i>	SE	<i>B</i>	SE
Gender	0.10	0.15	0.10	0.15
Employee	0.11	0.19	0.12	0.19
Supervisor	0.10	0.21	0.10	0.21
Short tenure	0.27	0.20	0.27	0.20
Medium tenure	0.28	0.19	0.28	0.19
Organizational Identification	0.14+	0.07	0.14+	0.07
Judgment of responsibility			-0.01	0.05
Hopelessness				
<i>F</i> -test value	1.41 ^{ns}		1.21 ^{ns}	
<i>R</i> ²	0.3		0.03	
ΔR^2			0.00	
Adjusted <i>R</i> ²	0.01		0.01	

Notes: Max *n* = 338. *B*, unstandardized regression coefficient; SE, standard error. *p*⁺ < 0.10; **p* < 0.05; ***p* < 0.01

Table III.
Hierarchical
regression analysis
results for learning
from crisis

Figure 2. Mediation of the indirect effects of judgment of responsibility on learning from Crisis Through Hopelessness



Notes: * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$

Indirect Effects of Judgment of Responsibility on Learning through Hopelessness (ab paths)			
	Point estimate	Bias corrected estimate	95 percent confidence interval
		Lower	Upper
Hopelessness	-0.0345*	-0.0716	-0.0028
Partial Effect of Control Variables on Learning			
		<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>
Gender		0.10	0.15
Employee		0.26	0.20
Supervisor		0.11	0.21
Short tenure		0.17	0.21
Medium tenure		0.28	0.19
Organizational identification		0.12	0.07

Notes: $n = 338$. 5,000 bootstrap samples; * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$

Table IV. Bootstrap results for indirect effects

effect for Hopelessness. The table also reports the included control variables, none of which have a significant effect. This finding indicates that Judgment of Leader Responsibility has an indirect effect on Crisis Learning, one that is mediated by Hopelessness[1]. In sum, Judgment of Leader Responsibility is associated with greater Hopelessness, which in turn leads to lower Crisis Learning. This indirect relationship supports *H2*.

To test *H3*, which proposed that Job Satisfaction moderates the relationship of Judgment of Leader Responsibility on Hopelessness, we first regressed Hopelessness on the control variables and Judgment of Leader Responsibility. Model 1, in Table V, reports the control variables. Model 2 shows that Judgment of Leader Responsibility is positively related to Hopelessness. Model 3 adds in Job Satisfaction and shows that

Variables	Control		Main		Effects		Model 5		Model 6	
	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE
Gender	-0.01	0.10	-0.01	0.10	0.02	0.09	0.01	0.09	0.01	0.09
Employee	0.83**	0.13	0.78**	0.13	0.60**	0.12	0.60**	0.12	0.44**	0.13
Supervisor	0.13	0.14	0.02	0.14	-0.06	0.13	-0.09	0.13	-0.04	0.13
Short tenure	-0.69**	0.14	-0.53**	0.13	-0.49**	0.12	-0.46**	0.12	-0.49**	0.12
Medium tenure	-0.07	0.13	-0.02	0.12	0.05	0.12	0.04	0.12	0.07	0.12
Organizational identification	-0.16**	0.05	-0.13**	0.05	-0.05	0.05	-0.06	0.05	-0.09*	0.05
Judgment of responsibility			0.19**	0.03	0.16**	0.03	0.70**	0.24	0.14**	0.03
Job Satisfaction					-0.29**	0.05	0.24	0.24		
Judgment of responsibility × Job satisfaction							-0.08*	0.04		
Sufficient crisis communication									-0.21**	0.03
Judgment of responsibility × Sufficient crisis communication										
F-test value	12.77**		16.98**		21.49**		19.91**		21.31**	
R ²	0.19		0.27		0.34		0.35		0.34	
ΔR ²			0.08		0.07		0.01		0.07	
Adjusted R ²	0.17		0.25		0.33		0.34		0.33	

Notes: Max $n = 342$, B, unstandardized regression coefficient; SE, standard error. * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$

having a higher Job Satisfaction reduces the level of hopelessness. Model 4 includes the interaction term between Judgment of Leader Responsibility and Job Satisfaction. The findings reveal a significantly negative impact for the interaction term. This suggests there is a moderating effect in which Job Satisfaction buffers the effect of Judgment of Leader Responsibility on Hopelessness and supports *H3*.

Table V also reports the analysis for evaluating *H4*, whether Sufficient Crisis Communication moderates the relationship between Judgment of Leader Responsibility and Hopelessness. As is shown in Model 5, when Sufficient Crisis Communication is added to Model 2, the main effect for Judgment of Leader Responsibility remains and that Sufficient Crisis Communication significantly reduces the level of Hopelessness. In Model 6, the interaction term is included and is significant. Similar to the findings for *H3*, Sufficient Crisis Communication appears to buffer the impact of the Judgment of Leader Responsibility on Hopelessness, supporting *H4*. Figures 3 (a and b) show a mapping of the

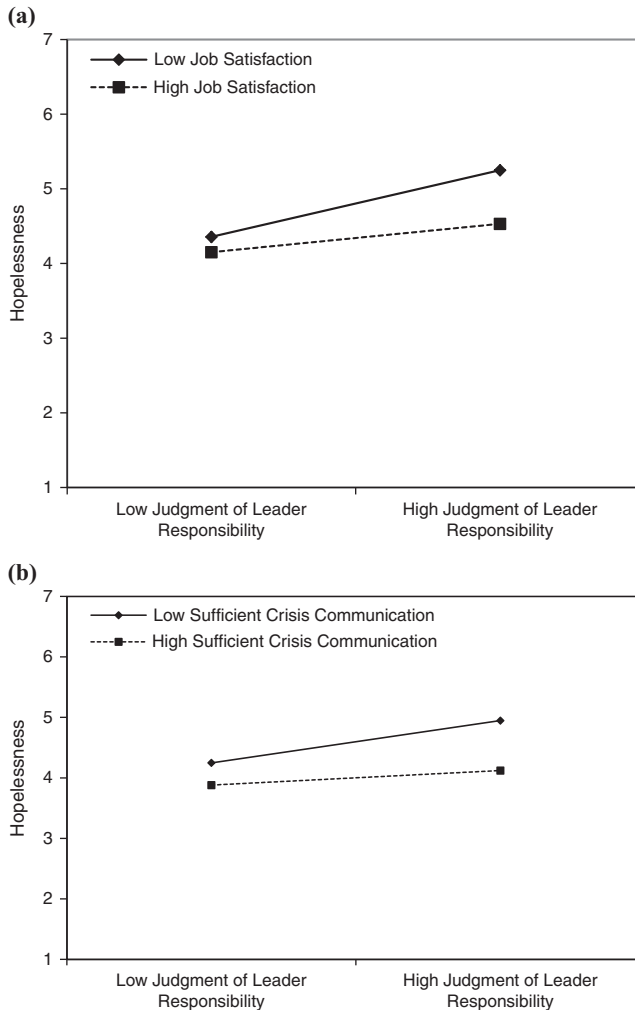


Figure 3.
(a) Interaction of judgment of leader responsibility and job satisfaction on hopelessness.
(b) Interaction of judgment of leader responsibility and crisis communication on hopelessness

interaction effects. Figure 3a illustrates that Hopelessness is higher when there is a combination of a high Judgment of Leader Responsibility and a low Job Satisfaction score, than when there is either a low Judgment of Leader Responsibility or high Job Satisfaction score. Similarly in Figure 3b, there is greater Hopelessness when there is both a high Judgment of Leader Responsibility and a low score for Sufficient Crisis Communication than when there is either low Judgment of Leader Responsibility or high Sufficient Crisis Communications scores. These figures support the hypothesized interaction effects.

A distinctive feature of our sample is the large number of volunteers. Over 80 percent of our sample came from volunteers. Because of this sample mix we controlled for employee/volunteer status in our model. In addition, to evaluate whether there are significant differences between these two sub groups, we conducted an analysis of variance for employees and volunteers. For the control variables, the two groups did not differ in terms of tenure in the organization and gender. Not surprisingly, employees were more likely to be in a supervisory role. For the independent and dependent variables, employees assigned significantly greater responsibility to leaders for the crisis, and reported higher levels of hopelessness, and lower scores on sufficient crisis communication and job satisfaction than volunteers. There was no difference, however, between employees and volunteers in terms of learning from the crisis. Because of employees' higher scores on the judgment of leader responsibility and the hopelessness variables, we also tested whether our findings are driven by the employees' responses. We conducted a subgroup analysis using only volunteers' data. The subgroup analysis revealed the same support for the hypotheses that was found with the overall sample, suggesting that our resulting model applies to both employees and volunteers.

To summarize, our study finds that followers (both employee and volunteer groups) make judgments of leader responsibility and learn during a crisis, but there is no direct relationship between judgments of leader responsibility and crisis learning. However, there is an indirect effect through hopelessness. Further, we find that the relationship between judgments of leader responsibility and hopelessness is moderated by job satisfaction and sufficient crisis communication. Figure 4 presents the model that is supported by our findings.

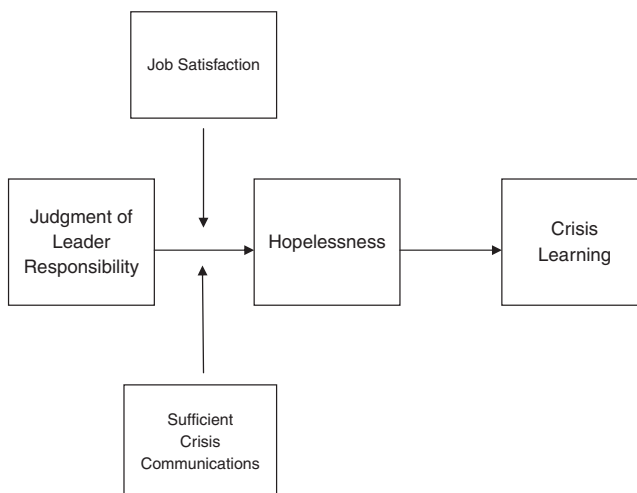


Figure 4. Supported Model of the Effects of Judgments of Leader Responsibility on Crisis Learning and Hopelessness

Contributions, discussion, and implications

In this section we discuss our findings in terms of their contributions to research, and their implications for future research and practice.

Contributions and discussion

Our findings contribute to knowledge in three research streams: first, crisis attributions and judgments; second, crisis learning; and third, hopelessness as a psychological state during organizational crises. In addition, our study makes a contribution by using the survey method and collecting data from individuals who are in the throes of a crisis. We discuss each of these areas of contribution below.

Crisis attributions and judgments

Extant research on stakeholders' judgments of organizational leaders during a crisis tends to focus on the judgments of external stakeholders, and the importance of impression management to respond to these judgments (e.g. Coombs, 2007; Marcus and Goodman, 1991; Wise, 2004). Research that has taken the followers' perspective has focussed on the factors that influence judgments of responsibility (e.g. Brown and White, 2011; Schwarz, 2012); and how leaders during a crisis tend to be viewed as charismatic (e.g. Halverson *et al.*, 2004; Hunt *et al.*, 1999). An area that has received limited empirical research attention is followers' judgments and their effects when the "romance of leadership" (Bligh *et al.*, 2011) is tarnished during a crisis. Our study addresses this issue and both our qualitative and quantitative data suggest that, in the context of a bankruptcy, followers judged their leaders to be responsible for either causing or mishandling the crisis. Our study was conducted in a nonprofit organization and we found that employees assigned greater responsibility for the crisis situation to their leaders than volunteers, however, both groups made judgments of culpability. Our qualitative data also provides insights into the areas of leadership that followers focus on as they make their judgments. In our study, they focussed on the competence of their leaders; their relationship with followers; their relationship with external stakeholders, such as city officials; and the extent to which the leaders were doing enough in terms of marketing the organization. Therefore, leaders are a target of attention for various groups of followers during a crisis, and followers focus on their leaders' behaviors and make judgments. Unlike the research on leaders' charisma during a crisis (Halverson *et al.*, 2004; Hunt *et al.*, 1999), we find that leaders may be judged harshly and negatively by their followers.

Crisis learning

We also contribute to the literature on crisis learning (e.g. Elliott and Macpherson, 2010; Kooor-Misra and Nathan, 2000; Kooor-Misra, 2009; Pearson and Mitroff, 1993; Smith and Elliott, 2007). In our study, both the quantitative and qualitative data suggest that followers were learning during the crisis. Prior crisis learning research provides insights into when individuals learn (e.g. Kooor-Misra and Nathan, 2000) and barriers to learning (e.g. Smith and Elliott, 2007). Our study also provides insights into what is learned and the targets of learning. We found that followers were learning about the crisis in terms of its causes, impact on morale and work, and strategies for its resolution. They were also learning about their leaders and their competence in the crisis situation. In addition, followers were learning about the organizations' external stakeholders and how the organization was being perceived by them. We also provide additional insights into understanding the barriers to crisis learning. We find that followers' judgments that their

leaders are culpable for creating or mishandling a crisis do not directly reduce their crisis learning. However, it has indirect effects through the sense of hopelessness that followers may experience in these situations. Judgments of leader culpability and hopelessness have not been previously studied as barriers to crisis learning.

Hopelessness during an organizational crisis

Extant management research has acknowledged the role of hopelessness as it contributes to cynicism toward organizational change (e.g. Wanous *et al.*, 1994), and as an outcome of discrimination (e.g. Deitch *et al.*, 2003). The role of hopelessness in influencing the behavior of internal stakeholders during an organizational crisis has not been previously addressed. Our study addressed this issue, and in addition to its role in influencing crisis learning, we also provide insights into the complexities associated with followers' hopelessness when they judge their leaders to be responsible for creating or mishandling a crisis situation. We studied two moderators and found that even if individuals judged their leaders to be responsible for creating a crisis situation, those who were satisfied with their jobs, and those who perceived that the crisis communications that they were receiving were sufficient experienced less hopelessness. It is possible that job satisfaction served as a psychological resource in this negative situation, and access to information enabled them to experience more personal control. We also found that employees experienced more hopelessness, reported less job satisfaction, and felt that the crisis communications that they were receiving were more insufficient than volunteers. Therefore, followers who are more dependent on their leaders may be more negatively affected in these situations. However, all followers in our sample were negatively affected to some extent and experienced hopelessness when they judged their leaders to be culpable, and they experienced reduced hopelessness in situations of high job satisfaction and Sufficient Crisis Communications. Our paper provides insights into some of the causes and effects of followers' hopelessness during organizational crises, and the moderating factors that may influence its levels.

Data from primary sources from an actual organization in crisis

Research on followers' attributions during a crisis tends to be based on data from laboratory studies (e.g. Halverson *et al.*, 2004; Hunt *et al.*, 1999), and studies on crisis learning are largely theoretical in nature (e.g. Smith and Elliott, 2007), or based on secondary data sources (e.g. Madsen and Desai, 2010). Our study contributes to research by using the survey method and provides insights from individuals who are in the throes of an actual crisis. Our study utilizes both quantitative and qualitative data. Therefore, our study is able to provide additional insights into crisis attributions and learning by using a method which is less frequently utilized in these areas of research.

Limitations and implications for future research

A limitation of our study is that we were not able to study the effects of judgments of leader culpability over time. Therefore, future research could test our findings in a longitudinal study, and examine how long hopelessness persists and continues to affect crisis learning. Additional limitations of our study are that we do not have a baseline measure of followers' knowledge prior to the crisis, and individuals in our study rate their own crisis learning. Because of the difficulties of knowing which organization is going to experience a crisis it is difficult to develop such a baseline measure.

An alternate method that could be used in future research is to also collect data from other sources such as managers or co-workers who could provide additional perspectives on the extent to which individuals are learning during a crisis.

Implications for practice

Our paper also has some implications for leaders. First, it is important that leaders understand that they are being judged by their followers during a crisis and that these judgments, if negative, could foster hopelessness and reduce crisis learning. Since learning from a crisis is important for organizations to be able to successfully recover from a crisis experience (Kovoor-Misra, 2009), such indirect effects and a loss of learning could be a cost for organizations. Typically during a crisis organizations may experience financial, reputational and human and social costs. We find that in situations of perceived leader culpability and hopelessness there is also a learning cost for organizations. Therefore, managing the judgments of internal stakeholders is important. Second, we suggest that if leaders enable their followers to have high job satisfaction prior to a crisis it could reduce their sense of hopelessness during a crisis. Third, it is critical that leaders keep their followers apprised of the crisis situation as perceptions that the crisis communications that they are receiving are sufficient tend to reduce their sense of hopelessness. Therefore, communicating with employees and other internal stakeholders during a crisis is important. Finally, it is important that leaders of nonprofit organizations manage the perceptions of both their employee and volunteer groups during a crisis. Their employees may judge them more harshly than their volunteers. However, both groups make judgments of leader culpability and experience hopelessness and reduced learning in these situations.

To conclude, leadership is a difficult task and sometimes leaders may be judged by their followers to be culpable for creating or mishandling a crisis situation. Such judgments have costs for organizations in terms of followers experiencing hopelessness and tending not to learn from the crisis situation. Therefore, to successfully maneuver their organizations out of crisis, it is important that leaders pay attention to the perceptions of their followers. We suggest that, in addition to a focus on external stakeholders, managing the judgments of internal stakeholders is a key task of effective crisis management.

Note

1. These results were also supported using the four step process to test for mediation proposed by Baron and Kenny (1986) and Kenny (2014).

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