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Culpable leaders, trust, emotional exhaustion, and identification during a crisis

Sarah Kovoor-Misra
The Business School, University of Colorado Denver, Denver, Colorado, USA, and
Shanthi Gopalakrishnan
School of Management, New Jersey Institute of Technology, Newark, New Jersey, USA

Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to investigate followers' judgments of the culpability of their leaders and the organization's external stakeholders in causing a crisis. The authors study the differences in effects of these judgments on their trust toward their leaders, their emotional exhaustion, and their levels of organizational identification.

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

Findings – The authors find that individuals' judgments that their leaders were culpable led to reduced trust, increased emotional exhaustion, and contrary to expectations reduced organizational identification. Therefore, it appears that in situations of perceived leader culpability during a crisis, followers tightly couple their leaders with the organization as a whole. In contrast, their judgments that external stakeholders were culpable were associated with increased trust toward their leaders, increased organizational identification, and they had no relationship with their levels of emotional exhaustion. The analysis of the qualitative data provides some insights into their judgments and the dependent variables.

Research limitations/implications – Organizational members' judgments of culpability are important factors that should be considered in crisis management research, and in research on trust, emotional exhaustion, and organizational identification. A limitation of the study is that it is cross-sectional in nature. Therefore, future research could test the findings in a longitudinal study.

Practical implications – Leaders need to understand the judgments of their followers during an organizational crisis. These judgments have implications for when and how leaders can mobilize their followers and the leadership tasks during crisis containment.

Originality/value – Extant research tends to focus on the judgments of external stakeholders during a crisis. This study is one of the first to examine the effects of internal stakeholders' judgments of culpability for causing a crisis on their trust, emotional exhaustion, and organizational identification. Further, existing empirical studies on followers' attributions during a crisis tend to be laboratory based. The study provides empirical evidence from individuals in an actual organization in crisis.

Keywords Leadership, Trust, Identification, Attribution, Crisis, Emotional exhaustion

Paper type Research paper

Crises such as the loss of the Malaysian Airline flight (MH 370) and the Hurricane Katrina disaster highlight how issues of culpability become salient for individuals during a crisis. For instance, in the case of the Malaysian Airlines crisis, issues of

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culpability were raised concerning the pilots, the quality of the aircraft, and the handling of the crisis by the Malaysian government. In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina that devastated states along the Gulf of Mexico in 2005, even though it was a natural disaster, there were questions as to whether the Federal Emergency Management Agency bungled the handling of the crisis situation, and whether the various city governments could have minimized the damage by having superior infrastructure in their cities.

Organizational crises are significant and ambiguous events that have the potential to threaten the survival and goals of an organization (Kovoor-Misra, 2009; Pearson and Clair, 1998). Judgments of stakeholder culpability for a crisis enable individuals to make sense of the negative situation, cognitively contain the problem, reduce uncertainty, and foster adaptation (Folkman, 1984; Weiner, 1985). In addition, they are important because they shape the attitudes and behaviors of those making the judgments. For instance, individuals who judge others as being responsible for creating a negative situation may experience anger (Jeong, 2009; Weiner, 1985), feelings of revenge (Aquino *et al.*, 2001), and in some cases hopelessness (Abramson *et al.*, 1989). In contrast, if they were to judge others as being a victim it could elicit sympathy and helping behaviors (Jeong, 2010; Rudolph *et al.*, 2004; Weiner, 1995). Leaders play a key role in sensegiving during a crisis, and in providing direction in post-crisis recovery (Kahn *et al.*, 2013; Weick, 1993). Therefore, it is important that they understand the judgments of their key stakeholders as they may not only have consequences for their organizations, such as legal liability and a tarnished reputation in situations of perceived culpability, but they could also affect the support that they can mobilize as they strive to minimize damage, and facilitate post-crisis recovery.

A critical stakeholder group for leaders of organizations in crisis is their followers. Crisis management researchers, however, have not systematically studied the effects of followers' judgments that their leaders are culpable for a crisis on their attitudes and behaviors. Neither have they examined the differences in effects when followers attribute the cause of the crisis to stakeholders outside the organization, such as the media, governmental agencies, or other external groups. Instead, much of the focus in the organizational crisis attribution literature has been on the judgments of external stakeholders and the strategies that organizational leaders could use to manage their perceptions (e.g. Coombs, 2007; Marcus and Goodman, 1991; Wise, 2004). In addition, those studies of followers' attributions have examined the attributions of charisma to leaders during a crisis (e.g. Halverson *et al.*, 2004; Hunt *et al.*, 1999), and the factors that shape their judgments (e.g. Schwarz, 2012). The effects of followers' judgments when they do not perceive their leaders as charismatic and the "romance of leadership" (Bligh *et al.*, 2011) is tarnished have received limited empirical research attention. Further, most research on followers' attributions in a crisis tend to be conducted in laboratory studies (e.g. Halverson *et al.*, 2004; Hunt *et al.*, 1999), and we lack empirical evidence from individuals experiencing an actual organizational crisis.

In this paper, we focus on followers' judgments of the culpability of their leaders and the external stakeholders of the organization, such as the media or governmental agencies, in causing a crisis for their organization. We study the differences in effects of these judgments on their trust toward their leaders, their emotional exhaustion, and their levels of organizational identification. These psychological states of followers are important because they have implications for the support that leaders can mobilize as they seek to contain a crisis. However, the effects of attributions on these states during a crisis have not been empirically examined. This study was conducted in an organization that filed for bankruptcy and is part of a larger study on followers'

attribution effects during a crisis. In an earlier paper (Kovoor-Misra and Olk, 2015), we focused on followers' judgments that their leaders were culpable and examined their effects on their sense of hopelessness and crisis learning behaviors. This study also examines followers' judgments of external stakeholders, and it also broadens understanding of the effects of their attributions on their other psychological states, such as their trust toward their leaders, their emotional exhaustion, and their levels of organizational identification. In subsequent sections of this paper, we discuss our model, the methodology used in our study, our findings, and implications for future research and practice. Next, we present our theoretical model.

Theoretical model

Attribution theory suggests that when individuals judge others, they assess the extent to which the behavior of a target is consistent with his/her previous behaviors, distinctive from their other behaviors, and whether others in the same situation would behave similarly (Kelley, 1973; Schwarz, 2012). Additional factors that individuals may take into account are whether the behavior was controllable, stable, and global in that it could affect a range of outcomes (Weiner, 1985, 1995). Further, exacerbating the complexity of this attribution process is, that as followers judge their leaders, the process is influenced by their liking of their leaders, their personal emotional characteristics (Dasborough and Ashkanasy, 2002), and by their own social attribution style (Martinko *et al.*, 2007).

In this paper, our focus is on the effects of these judgments on those who are making the attributions. Prior research on attribution effects, in contexts other than organizational crises, suggests that those who judge a target to be responsible for a negative situation may experience anger (Jeong, 2009; Weiner, 1985), seek revenge (Aquino *et al.*, 2001), and in situations where they have less power they may experience hopelessness (Abramson *et al.*, 1989). Extant research also suggests that those who judge a target as being a victim of a situation may demonstrate sympathy and helping behaviors toward the individual (Jeong, 2010; Rudolph *et al.*, 2004; Weiner, 1995). As previously stated, in this study we examine the effects of followers' judgments of the culpability of their organizational leaders and other external parties (the media, governmental agencies, etc.) on their trust toward their leaders, their organizational identification, and their emotional exhaustion. Figures 1 and 2 present our hypothesized model. We further discuss these relationships below.

Judgments of responsibility and trust toward leaders

When individuals trust, they have a belief that that they can rely on another individual and that they have goodwill toward them (Dirks, 2000). Trust becomes salient for individuals when they feel vulnerable, interdependent, or at risk (Rousseau *et al.*, 1998). During the threats associated with a crisis, trust and intra- and inter-group issues become salient (Mishra, 1996; Webb, 1996; Weick, 1993). In these situations, for leaders to be viewed as trustworthy they need to be perceived as competent, honest, benevolent, and concerned (Mishra, 1996; Tomlinson and Mayer, 2009; Webb, 1996). Followers' trust is important for leaders during a crisis because it has been associated with citizenship behaviors, job satisfaction, and organizational commitment (Dirks and Ferrin, 2002). Therefore, trust is an important variable to be considered in understanding the effects of judgments of responsibility during a crisis.

We expect that those individuals who judge their leaders to be responsible for causing a crisis situation to experience a reduction in their trust toward them. When they judge their leaders as being culpable, they could perceive them to be incompetent or

lacking in integrity, which in turn can erode trust (Lapidot *et al.*, 2007; Mishra, 1996; Webb, 1996). In contrast, we expect when followers judge individuals or groups external to the organization, (such as the media, government agencies, or other more nefarious groups), to be responsible for causing the crisis situation they will rally around their leaders and demonstrate more trust toward them. This is because judgments of others as victims tend to elicit sympathy (Jeong, 2010; Rudolph *et al.*, 2004; Weiner, 1995). Further, in the face of shared external threat followers will experience a greater interdependence with their leaders and be more willing to risk trusting them (Rousseau *et al.*, 1998). The above reasoning leads to the following hypotheses:

H1a. Followers' judgments that their leaders are responsible for causing a crisis situation will be negatively associated with their trust toward them.

H1b. Followers' judgments that external stakeholders are responsible for causing a crisis situation will be positively associated with their trust toward their leaders.

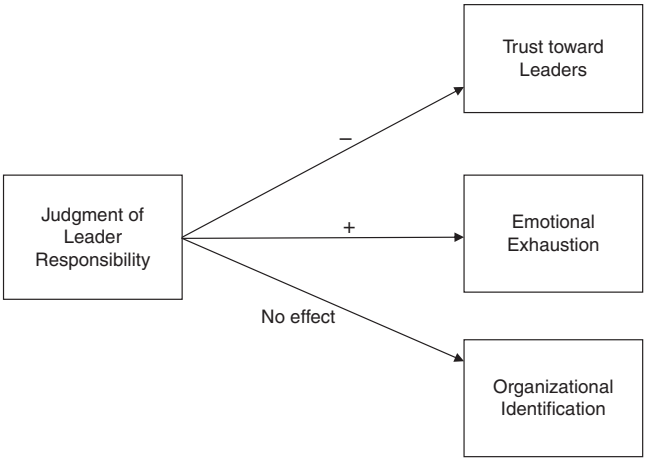

Figure 1.
Effects of judgments of leader responsibility on followers' trust, emotional exhaustion, and organizational identification

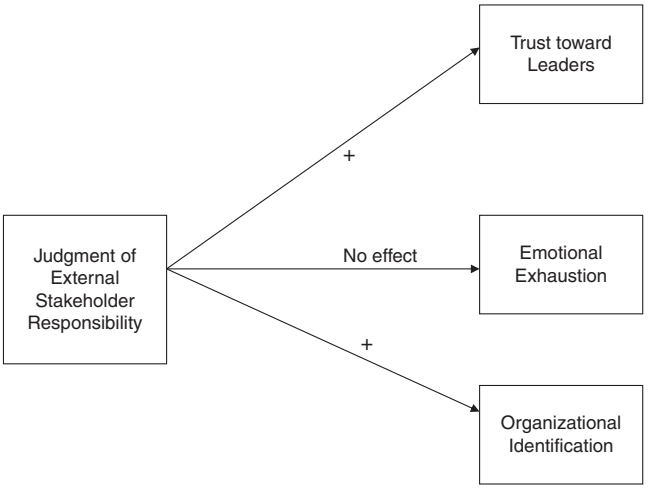

Figure 2.
Effects of judgments of external stakeholder responsibility on followers' trust, emotional exhaustion, and organizational identification

Judgments of responsibility and emotional exhaustion

When individuals are emotionally exhausted they feel emotionally and physically drained and overextended (Lee and Ashforth, 1993; Wright and Cropanzano, 1998). The extent to which individuals are emotionally exhausted during a crisis has implications for the resources that leaders can muster as they strive to contain the crisis. An organizational crisis could lead to individuals being emotionally exhausted as they strive to resolve an urgent, high-stakes situation. Further, if followers perceive their leaders to be responsible for causing the negative, stressful situation we expect it could exacerbate their emotional exhaustion. First, they may feel that they cannot depend on their leaders for the emotional support and the sense of psychological safety that could have reduced their levels of emotional exhaustion (Grant *et al.*, 2014). In addition, they may feel stressed that they have to continue to work under these leaders who they perceive negatively. Finally, their judgments of leader culpability could lead to negative emotions of anger, fear, or hopelessness that could be emotionally draining (Abramson *et al.*, 1989; Tomlinson and Mayer, 2009; Weiner, 1985). In contrast, we expect that followers who perceive external parties to be responsible for causing the crisis situation to experience no difference in their emotional exhaustion levels. These individuals may already feel stressed from the crisis, but we predict that this judgment will not add to their emotional exhaustion as they can continue to rely on their organizational leaders and derive emotional support from them. This discussion leads to the following hypotheses:

H2a. Followers' judgments that their organizational leaders are responsible for causing a crisis situation will be positively associated with their emotional exhaustion levels.

H2b. There will be no relationship between followers' judgments that external stakeholders are responsible for causing a crisis situation and their emotional exhaustion levels.

Judgments of responsibility and organizational identification

One of the ways by which individuals gain a sense of self is from their identification with social groups (e.g. Ashforth and Mael, 1989; Hogg and Terry, 2000). Individuals often identify with their work organizations and define themselves by the organizations' core traits (Dutton *et al.*, 1994). Organizational identification meets individuals' needs for: self-continuity, distinctiveness, self-enhancement, and interpersonal connection (Cooper and Thatcher, 2010; Dutton *et al.*, 1994; Sluss and Ashforth, 2007). Individuals' organizational identification levels are important because they are positively associated with their job satisfaction, organizational commitment, citizenship behaviors, creativity, and loyalty (Dutton *et al.*, 1994; Hongwei and Brown, 2013; Kim *et al.*, 2013).

We expect followers' judgments that their organizational leaders are responsible for causing a crisis situation to have no effect on their organizational identification levels. Despite the fact that leaders affect individuals' organizational identification levels, there are a number of other antecedents of their identification (Hongwei and Brown, 2013). For instance, individuals tend to identify with organizations that are prestigious, attractive, and distinctive from others (Dutton *et al.*, 1994). In addition, they may choose specific aspects of the organization with which to identify. For instance, they may identify with the mission of the organization, such as healing the sick, or they may define themselves by some of the organization's other positive traits, such as the fact

that the organization treats its employees well. Therefore, as long as these aspects are not challenged during a crisis, we expect that their judgments of their leaders as being culpable will not affect their attachment to the organization at large. In contrast, however, we expect that followers' judgments that external parties are responsible for causing an organizational crisis to be positively associated with their organizational identification levels. We expect that they will perceive external stakeholders as attacking the organization with which they identify and define themselves. As a result, such an attack will be taken personally, and as they feel defensive and seek to protect the organization they will increase their levels of organizational identification (Dutton and Dukerich, 1991; Kovoor-Misra, 2009). This discussion leads to the following hypotheses:

H3a. Followers' judgments that their organizational leaders are responsible for causing an organizational crisis will have no effect on their levels of organizational identification.

H3b. Followers' judgments that external stakeholders are responsible for causing an organizational crisis will be positively associated with their levels of organizational identification.

We next describe the methodology used to test our model.

Methodology

We discuss the methods used in this study by describing the focal organization that served as the context of our study, the data collection methods, sample, and measures.

Organizational context

The organization that served as the context of our study was a three-year old, not-for-profit organization that provided educational entertainment to its visitors. We refer to the organization as EduEntertain in this paper to protect its identity. The organization had to file for Chapter 11 bankruptcy because, despite initial high attendance, the number of paying customers declined and the organization was not able to pay its debts to the bondholders and the city that had funded the organization. The crisis was covered by the media and the organization received negative publicity. There was ambiguity as to which groups of stakeholders were responsible for causing the crisis situation for the organization. The obvious targets of judgment were the founders of the organization and the other top managers. However, there was also a perception that the media had unfairly covered the crisis, the city could have done more to support the organization, and the citizens could have rallied around the organization. Approximately a year after filing for bankruptcy the organization was bought by a private entity. In this process, the EduEntertain name was changed but the scientific, educational, and entertainment mission persisted.

Data collection methods and sample

We conducted a survey, and collected both quantitative and qualitative data, approximately three months after the organization filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy. The organization was staffed by 628 employees and volunteers. The volunteers in the organization were very active and supported the organization's core work by providing tours and taking care of the exhibits. We mailed a survey with return paid postage to all 628 employees and volunteers. We received 354 surveys that resulted in a response

rate of 56.4 percent. The number of usable surveys, however, was 335. We believe our high-response rate was because the Chapter 11 bankruptcy was an emotional issue for the respondents, and the survey was a means for them to express their voice.

Measures

All items in the survey were measured on a seven-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree; 4 = neither agree nor disagree; 7 = strongly agree). We also solicited write-in comments to enable the respondents to express their opinions and provide us with insights into their ratings. Below, we describe the scales used to measure our variables.

Judgments of leader responsibility. We assessed individuals' judgments 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 that are a part of the organization, such as the founders or the top managers." To ensure construct validity, where possible, we compared respondents' scores with their write-in comments. In an earlier paper (Kovoor-Misra and Olk, 2015), we provided evidence of qualitative data support for this measure. For example, a respondent who felt strongly that their leaders were responsible (score of 7) stated that: "The founders are to blame for our initial downfall. The CEO continues to fail us." In contrast, an example of a comment made by a respondent who judged their leaders as not being responsible (score of 1) was "I have been very impressed with the effort put into keeping the volunteers informed and happy." Therefore, the qualitative data provides construct validity support for this measure.

Judgments of external stakeholders' responsibility. We measured this variable by asking respondents "Focusing on the recent events that led to EduEntertain's crisis and the Chapter 11 filing, to what extent do you believe the current situation was caused primarily by people outside the organization (e.g. city, press, or the citizens, etc.). To assess support for construct validity, where possible we also compared the respondents' ratings to their write-in comments. Table I provides some examples. For instance, we found that those who perceived that external parties were very responsible (score of 6 or 7) they made comments such as "Most people's perception comes from the media (usually negative)," "The newspaper has hurt us with bad

Table I. Qualitative data support for the external stakeholder responsibility scale

Respondents' comments	Rating
Most people's perception comes from the media (usually negative)	7
I perceive EduEntertain as a well-run organization. The only bad decision is that we are not part of the city funded scientific entities in City Park. Attendance would be much higher in my opinion	7
Not very much of the public is aware that EduEntertain is still open	7
The public perception of EduEntertain as a whole is negative […]. Unfortunately adults want more entertainment than education	7
The newspaper has hurt us with bad publicity. I don't feel EduEntertain is responsible for this	6
I feel that EduEntertain's management is doing the best that they can	6
It seems obvious that we need a complete top down change to make EduEntertain a success. This place is a huge/valuable resource, if we lose it because of management inability to change […]. That will be pathetic	2
Upper management, marketing, and PR have consistently shown very poor judgment in the decisions and actions they have taken over the last several years	1
EduEntertain has always had poor marketing and public relations	1
EduEntertain has done a lousy job developing any sort of broad-based community support	1

publicity, and I don't think EduEntertain is responsible for this," and "I perceive EduEntertain as a well-run organization. The only bad decision is that we are not part of the city funded scientific entities in City Park. Attendance would have been much higher in my opinion." In contrast, those respondents who felt strongly that external stakeholders were not responsible (score of 1 or 2) they made comments such as "It seems obvious that we need a complete top down change to make EduEntertain a success. This place is a huge/valuable resource, if we lose it because of management's inability to change […] that will be pathetic," "Upper management, marketing, and PR have consistently shown very poor judgment in the decisions and actions that they have taken over the last several years," and "EduEntertain has always had poor marketing and public relations." Therefore, the qualitative data provides construct validity support for this measure.

Trust toward leaders. We used McAllister's (1995) cognition-based six-item trust scale to measure individuals' trust toward their leaders. Some sample items from this scale are: "EduEntertain's top managers approach their job with professionalism and dedication," and "Given the track record of EduEntertain's top management, I see no reason to doubt their competence and preparation for the job." The Cronbach's α for this scale was 0.92.

Emotional exhaustion. To measure individuals' emotional exhaustion levels we used Maslach and Jackson's (1981, 1986) nine-item emotional exhaustion scale. Examples of items from this scale include: "I feel emotionally drained from my work at EduEntertain," and "I feel like I'm at the end of my rope." The Cronbach's α for this scale was 0.92.

Organizational identification. To measure individuals' organizational identification levels we used six items from Mael and Tetrick's (1992) organizational identification scale. Some sample items from the scale included: "When I talk about EduEntertain I usually say 'we' rather than 'they,' " and "When someone criticizes EduEntertain it feels like a personal insult." The Cronbach's α for this scale was 0.79.

Control variables. We collected data on four control variables: follower position (volunteer vs employee), follower tenure, gender of the respondents, and the supervisory level of the respondents (supervisor vs non-supervisor). Next, we discuss the methods used to analyze the data, and present our findings.

Analysis and results

Table II presents the descriptive statistics and the correlations between variables. As indicated by this table, the followers overall had moderate levels of trust toward their leaders (mean = 4.33), had relatively low levels of emotional exhaustion (mean = 2.04), and had relatively high levels of organizational identification (mean = 5.50).

The qualitative data also provides some insights into these variables. To provide a richer understanding of the perspective of the respondents, we used the dependent variables as themes (Dutton and Dukerich, 1991) to sort their write-in comments. We then compared their comments with their mean scores for each of the dependent variables. Table III provides some examples.

To test our model, we ran three linear regression models for each of the three dependent variables – trust, emotional exhaustion, and organizational identification. (We also ran the SPSS Harmon's single factor method to test for common method variance for the items that measured the dependent variables. We found that they explained 38.11 percent of the variance which is within acceptable limits.) Tables IV-VI provide the results of the linear regression models. For each dependent variable, in

Variables	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Leader responsibility	5.71	1.49	1.00								
2. External stakeholder responsibility	4.73	1.77	−0.30**	1.00							
3. Trust	4.33	1.54	−0.47**	0.26**	1.00						
4. Emotional exhaustion	2.04	1.23	0.25**	−0.08	−0.54**	1.00					
5. Organizational identification	5.50	1.00	−0.11	0.23**	0.22**	−0.12*	1.00				
6. Employee vs volunteer	1.18	0.39	0.15**	−0.05	−0.41**	0.46**	−0.04	1.00			
7. Tenure	1.45	0.78	−0.15**	0.04	−0.11*	0.16**	0.07	−0.09	1.00		
8. Male vs female	0.59	0.49	−0.01	0.04	0.12*	−0.00	−014**	0.06	−0.05	1.00	
9. Supervisory level supervisor vs non-supervisor	0.15	0.35	0.16**	0.02	−0.14*	0.19	0.03	0.09	0.19**	−0.03	1.00

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

Table II.
Descriptive statistics and correlations

Respondents' comments	Mean rating
Trust	
It is now impossible to believe anything that top management says	1.0
The administrative side of the organization does not know what it should be doing to get a better identity in the community	1.0
Top management is not honest with staff	1.5
Recent volunteer resignations and terminations speak very poorly of management	1.5
Fire the marketing director and CEO. Hire someone who understands customers	2.67
Emotional exhaustion	
EduEntertain used to be a great place to work but the low morale since the closing is getting to me and affecting my motivation to do my job well	5.75
EduEntertain used to be an enjoyable place to work, but now everyone is overworked and I see productivity and our image suffering	5.67
I am frustrated that upper management is often not held accountable	5.11
EduEntertain's employees are frustrated at the over-paid co-founders and are tired from cleaning up their messes	4.44
Organizational identification	
The recent crisis for EduEntertain will be severe for me if it closes, and I lose the volunteer positions I am passionate about	7
As an institution, I love EduEntertain and my job there	6.33
I love EduEntertain!! It's always a thrill and a joy to walk in the door! I've learned so much, met and worked with great people, and feel blessed to be in such a special space	6.17

Table III.
Example of respondents' comments and their mean rating for the dependent variables

Model 1 we entered the control variables: follower position (volunteer/ full-time employee), follower tenure (length of service), gender of the respondent (male/female), and supervisory level (supervisor/non-supervisor). In Model 2, we added the independent variable leader responsibility (whether the respondent attributed responsibility for causing the crisis to their leaders). In Model 3, in addition to the

Variables	Model 1	Model 2 leader responsibility and trust	Model 3 external stakeholder responsibility and trust
Constant	6.38***	8.23***	5.40***
Follower position (volunteer – 1 vs employee – 0)	−1.61***	−1.39***	−1.57***
Follower tenure	−0.24**	−0.14	−0.26**
Gender male – 0 vs female – 1	0.45**	0.44**	0.41**
Supervisory level supervisor – 1 vs non-supervisor – 0	−0.29	−0.06	−0.29
Leader responsibility		−0.40***	
External stakeholder responsibility			0.21***
Adjusted R^2	0.19***	0.34***	0.25***
ΔR^2		0.15***	0.06***

Notes: **$p < 0.01$; ***$p < 0.001$

Table IV. Leader responsibility, external stakeholder responsibility, and trust

Variables	Model 1	Model 2 leader responsibility and EE	Model 3 external stakeholder responsibility and EE
Constant	−0.22	0.78**	0.01
Follower position (volunteer – 1 vs employee – 0)	1.56***	1.49***	1.55***
Follower tenure	0.30***	0.26***	0.30***
Gender male – 0 vs female – 1	−0.08	−0.08	−0.08
Supervisory level supervisor – 1 vs non-supervisor – 0	0.35*		0.35*
Leader responsibility		0.12**	
External stakeholder responsibility			−0.05
Adjusted R^2	0.26***	0.28***	0.26***
ΔR^2		0.02**	0.00

Notes: *$p < 0.05$; **$p < 0.01$; ***$p < 0.001$

Table V. Leader responsibility, external stakeholder responsibility, and emotional exhaustion (EE)

Variables	Model 1	Model 2 leader responsibility and identification	Model 3 external stakeholder responsibility and identification
Constant	5.37***	5.73***	4.76***
Follower position (volunteer – 1 vs employee – 0)	−0.14	−0.10	−0.12
Follower tenure	0.06	0.08**	0.06
Gender male – 0 vs female – 1	0.33**	0.33**	0.31**
Supervisory level supervisor – 1 vs non-supervisor – 0	0.09	0.13	0.08
Leader responsibility		−0.08*	
External stakeholder responsibility			0.13***
Adjusted R^2	0.02	0.03*	0.07**
ΔR^2		0.01*	0.05**

Notes: *$p < 0.05$; **$p < 0.01$; ***$p < 0.001$

Table VI. Leader responsibility, external stakeholder responsibility, and organizational identification

control variables, we entered the independent variable external stakeholder responsibility (whether the respondent attributed responsibility for causing the crisis to the organization's external stakeholders).

We find that when trust toward leaders is the dependent variable (Table IV), as indicated in Model 1 employees have significantly lower trust in their leaders than volunteers (follower position) ($\beta = -1.61$ $p < 0.001$), followers' with longer tenure ($\beta = -0.24, p < 0.001$) have lower trust, females have higher trust than males ($\beta = 0.45$, $p < 0.01$), but supervisory level is not significant (−0.29). The overall R^2 explained by the control variables is 0.19, $p < 0.001$. When the leader responsibility variable is entered in Model 2, the follower position and gender variables still remain significant in the same direction as before; and the relationship between leader responsibility and trust is negative and significant ($\beta = -0.40$, $p < 0.001$). The adjusted R^2 increases to 0.34 showing an increase of 0.15 which is significant at 0.001. Thus, the data strongly supports *H1a*. In contrast, when the external stakeholder responsibility variable is entered in Model 3, all control variables still remain significant in the same direction as before, but the relationship between the external stakeholder responsibility variable and trust toward leaders variable is positive and significant ($\beta = 0.21$, $p < 0.001$). The adjusted R^2 increases by 0.25 showing an increase of 0.06 that is significant at 0.001. The data shows strong support for *H1b*.

The qualitative data provide some insights into the factors that influence followers' trust. Consistent with prior research (e.g. Tomlinson and Mayer, 2009), the write-in comments of those who indicated that they had very low trust toward their leaders (Table III) suggest that their leaders' integrity and ability were important factors associated with their trust. For instance, respondents who indicated that they had very low trust in leadership commented "It is now impossible to believe anything that top management says" and "Top management is not honest with the staff." Another respondent commenting on their leaders' lack of competence said "The administrative side of the organization doesn't know what it should be doing to get a better identity in the community."

In testing for emotional exhaustion as the dependent variable (Table V), as indicated in Model 1 we find that the follower position ($\beta = 1.56$, $p < 0.001$) and follower tenure ($\beta = 0.30$, $p < 0.001$) variables are significant in the control model. Employees and followers with longer tenure experience greater emotional exhaustion. Supervisors experience greater emotional exhaustion compared to non-supervisors ($\beta = 0.35$, $p < 0.05$). The adjusted R^2 is 0.26. When the leader responsibility variable is entered in Model 2, the variable has a significant positive coefficient ($\beta = 0.12$, $p < 0.01$) implying that the more leaders are judged to be culpable, the greater the emotional exhaustion of the follower. The adjusted R^2 is 0.28, showing an increase of 0.02 ($p < 0.01$). Therefore, *H2a* is supported by the data. Respondents, who reported relatively high levels of emotional exhaustion, in their write-in comments also suggest that they were exhausted not only because of overwork and the negative image of the organization during the crisis, but also because of their leaders (Table III). For instance, one respondent stated, "I am frustrated that upper management is often not held accountable." In another example, a respondent also commented "EduEntertain's employees are frustrated at the over-paid co-founders and are tired from cleaning up their messes." However, when the external stakeholder responsibility variable is entered in Model 3, it not significant ($\beta = -0.05$, ns). The adjusted R^2 did not change beyond the variation explained by the control variables. Therefore, the data supported *H2b* that stated that there would be no relationship between follower's judgments that

external stakeholders are responsible for causing a crisis and their emotional exhaustion levels.

With respect to organizational identification, some of the comments of respondents who report strong organizational identification levels suggest that they felt very positively about the organization, the people, and their jobs (Table III). For instance, one respondent stated "I love EduEntertain!! It's always a thrill and a joy to walk in the door! I've learned so much, met and worked with great people, and I feel blessed to be in such a special space." Another individual said, "The recent crisis for EduEntertain will be severe for me if it closes, and I lose the volunteer positions I am passionate about." In testing our model (Table VI), we find that gender ($\beta = 0.33$, $p < 0.01$) is significant (Model 1), and women reported higher organizational identification levels than men. When the leader responsibility variable is entered in Model 2, the variable is significant ($\beta = -0.08$, $p < 0.05$). This implies that the more the followers judge their leaders as being responsible for causing the crisis situation the lower is their organizational identification levels. The adjusted R^2 for the overall model is 0.03 ($p < 0.05$), and perception of leader responsibility increases the R^2 by 0.01 (significant at 0.05). This finding does not support *H3a*. When the external stakeholder responsibility variable is entered into the equation in Model 3 (Table VI), the variable is significant ($\beta = 0.13$, $p < 0.001$) and increases the R^2 by 0.05 ($p < 0.01$) supporting *H3b*. Overall our data shows support for five out of the six hypotheses. Next, we discuss our findings and the implications for future research and practice.

Discussion, contributions, and implications

In this section, we address the contributions and limitations of our study, and the implications for future research and practice. We discuss these topics below.

Contributions of our study

Leaders during a crisis need to manage the perceptions and judgments of various stakeholders of the organization. However, crisis management research has tended to largely focus on the judgments of external stakeholders and how leaders can effectively manage them (e.g. Coombs, 2007; Marcus and Goodman, 1991; Wise, 2004). There is insufficient empirical research on the judgments and reactions of internal stakeholders during an organizational crisis. Further, most studies of followers' attributions during a crisis tend to be conducted in laboratory experiments (e.g. Hunt *et al.*, 1999), and we lack knowledge from individuals who are experiencing an actual organizational crisis. Our study, based on data from individuals in an organization that filed for bankruptcy provides empirical evidence of how organizational members judge their leaders and external parties, and react during a crisis. Our findings broaden understanding of followers' attributions and their effects during a crisis, and have implications for research on crisis leadership. We discuss each of these contributions below.

Attribution effects. Prior research in non-crisis contexts, have found that individuals who make a judgment of responsibility tend to experience anger (Jeong, 2009; Weiner, 1985), and in some instances hopelessness (Abramson *et al.*, 1989). In contrast, individuals who judge others as a victim in a negative situation demonstrate sympathy and helping behaviors toward them (Jeong, 2010; Rudolph *et al.*, 2004; Weiner, 1995). However, the effects of judgments of responsibility on individuals' trust, emotional exhaustion, and organizational identification in the context of an organizational crisis

have not been studied empirically. For instance, Mishra (1996) and Webb (1996) in their theoretical papers discuss the importance of trust during a crisis, but the differing effects of judgments of leader culpability vs external stakeholder culpability on followers' trust have not been previously studied. Our study makes a contribution by providing empirical evidence in this area. First, consistent with prior research on trust (e.g. Tomlinson and Mayer, 2009), our qualitative data suggests that the perceived ability and honesty of the leader are important factors in influencing followers' trust toward their leaders during a crisis. In addition, we find that if individuals judge their leaders to be culpable for causing a crisis it is associated with reduced trust. In contrast, if they judge external stakeholders to be responsible for the negative situation it is associated with increased trust toward their leaders. Therefore, judgments of culpability are important variables that are associated with followers' trust toward their leaders during a crisis, and should be considered in future research.

Further, we find that followers' judgments that their leaders are responsible for causing a crisis are also associated with them experiencing increased emotional exhaustion. In contrast, judgments that external stakeholders are responsible have no effects on their levels of emotional exhaustion. Crises by virtue of the threat, uncertainty, and ambiguity associated with them are stressful for individuals (Pearson and Clair, 1998). We find that perceptions of leader culpability in a crisis situation also exacerbate the emotional exhaustion that individuals may be experiencing. Since this relationship has not been previously empirically tested, our findings provide additional insights into individuals' emotional exhaustion during an organizational crisis.

Finally, we study the effects of judgments of responsibility for a crisis on individuals' organizational identification levels. As expected, we found that judgments that external stakeholders are responsible for causing an organizational crisis resulted in individuals experiencing increased identification with their organizations. Contrary to our expectations, we found that followers' judgments that their leaders were responsible for causing a crisis were associated with reduced organizational identification levels. We expected that when individuals identify with the organization at large and its many facets, their disappointments with their leaders would not influence their overall levels of organizational identification. However, our study suggests that during a crisis followers appear to tightly couple the leader with the organization, and their judgments that their leaders were culpable for causing the crisis affected their connection with the organization as a whole. Therefore, followers' judgments of responsibility during a crisis are strongly associated with their levels of organizational identification. This is an area that has not received much prior research attention.

Crisis leadership. Leaders play a key role in sensegiving during a crisis, and in providing direction in post-crisis recovery (Kahn *et al*., 2013; Weick, 1993). Our findings have implications for research on crisis leadership. Our study suggests that followers' judgments of responsibility are important contextual variables that have implications for when and how leaders can mobilize their followers during a crisis. Therefore, the tasks of leaders could vary based on whether their followers view them to be "villains" or "victims" in the crisis situation. For instance, if the leader is judged by their followers to be culpable in causing a crisis, in addition to focusing on the task of crisis containment, the leader needs to pay particular attention to their relationship with their followers. They need to engage in re-building trust with their followers, sustaining their emotional energy, and maintaining their identification with the organization. In contrast, in situations where external parties are judged by followers to

be responsible for the crisis situation, the leader has the advantage of their increased trust and organizational identification. As a result, the leader has more leeway in terms of their relationship with their followers and can more easily mobilize support for the task of crisis containment. Based on our findings we recommend that future research on crisis leadership should consider followers' judgments of responsibility as important contextual variables.

In addition, our study also highlights how various follower groups could differ in their psychological states during a crisis. For example, we found that employees had lower trust toward their leaders, and were more emotionally exhausted than volunteers. Employees because of their employment status may have more of a stake in the organization than volunteers, and could have been more affected by the crisis. This finding may be particularly relevant for leaders of nonprofit organizations. Further, those followers with longer tenure had less trust in their leaders and were more emotionally exhausted than those with less tenure. In addition, women had more trust toward their leaders and they reported higher levels of organizational identification than men. Therefore, as there may be differences in followers' reactions during a crisis, leaders need to be cognizant that "one size may not fit all" in the manner in which they manage their followers.

Limitations of our study and implications for future research

A limitation of our study is that it is cross-sectional in nature and we were not able to study the effects of followers' judgments of responsibility on trust, emotional exhaustion, and organizational identification over time. Therefore, future research could test our findings in a longitudinal study and examine the extent to which the effects on trust, organizational identification, and emotional exhaustion persist, or if they dissipate once the threat of the crisis diminishes.

Implications for practice

Our study also has some important implications for practice. First, it is imperative for leaders to understand the effects of their followers' judgments of responsibility during a crisis. Judgments that the leaders, rather than external stakeholders, are responsible for causing the crisis have negative effects on followers' trust toward their leaders, their identification with the organization in crisis, and their levels of emotional exhaustion. Therefore, in addition to the task of containing the crisis, in these situations leaders need to work on re-building trust and repairing their relationships with their followers. For instance, they could admit to their role in contributing to the crisis, correct any misperceptions, and clearly explain how things will be different in the future. Second, they need to acknowledge the stress that the crisis has caused their followers, and offer both resources and support to reduce their emotional exhaustion. Third, to sustain their followers' organizational identification, leaders could highlight the positive organizational attributes and discuss how, despite their errors in the past, the organization continues to be an attractive place of work. Finally, our study suggests that when leaders are perceived to be the victims in the crisis situation, they can expect increased trust and organizational identification from their followers. Therefore, they have the luxury of focusing on the task of crisis containment without the distraction of relationship repair efforts. However, it is important for leaders to acknowledge their followers support so that they can raise their morale and make them feel valued during the crisis.

To conclude, followers seek to make sense of a crisis by judging the extent to which their organizational leaders and external stakeholders are responsible for causing the negative situation. They seek to assess who are the "villains" vs the "victims" in the crisis situation. When their leaders are perceived to be culpable, there are significant negative effects on their trust, emotional exhaustion, and organizational identification levels. Our paper contributes to research on attribution effects and leadership during organizational crises.

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Corresponding author

Sarah Kovoor-Misra can be contacted at: Sarah.Kovoor@ucdenver.edu