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Crisis management at the government offices: a Swedish case study

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to gain a deeper understanding of crisis management at the Swedish Government office level in an international crisis by using a multiperspective approach, and paying particular attention to factors contributing favorably to the management process.

Design/methodology/approach – The Eyjafjallajökull volcano eruption on Iceland in 2010 was accompanied by an ash cloud that caused serious air traffic problems in large parts of Europe. Interviews were conducted with seven high-level informants at the Swedish Government offices and two informants at the Swedish Aviation Authority. An interview guide inspired by governance, command and control, and leadership perspectives was used.

Findings – A Crisis Coordination Secretariat, organizationally placed directly under the prime minister, coordinated the operation. A combination of mandate (hard power) and social smoothness (soft power) on part of the Crisis Coordination Secretariat contributed to confidence building and a collaboration norm between the ministries, and between the ministries and their underlying agencies. Preparatory training, exercises and a high level of system knowledge on part of the Crisis Coordination Secretariat – contextual intelligence – also contributed to a favorable crisis management.

Research limitations/implications – The study relies on retrospective self-report data only from a limited group of informants making generalizations difficult.

Practical implications – The organizational positioning of the Crisis Coordination Secretariat directly under the prime minister gave its members formal authority. These members in turn skillfully used social flexibility to build confidence and a will to collaborate. This combination of hard and soft power is recommended.

Originality/value – The multiperspective approach used when designing the interview guide and when interpreting the responses was new as well as the focus on factors contributing to crisis management success.

Keywords Leadership, Government, Emergency response, Crisis management, Natural hazard

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

The present case study focusses on how the Swedish Government offices managed the crisis following the ash cloud from the Icelandic volcano Eyjafjallajökull in 2010. Although not immediately life threatening, the handling of the event involved several

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nations, public and private organizations, and individual actors. The immediate challenge involved the assessment of the problem (the sense-making phase of crisis management) and the allocation of responsibilities in a regulatory and risk governing system that is both internationalized and tightly coupled (Boin *et al.*, 2005; Perrow, 1999). The ash cloud made flying risky and all civilian airlines were prohibited from flying over a large part of the European continent for several days. Air traffic was thereafter restricted and specifically rerouted for over a month after the eruption. As a result of the passenger decline, airline companies, airports and tour operators suffered heavy economic losses.

In large-scale crisis management, it is a common experience that collaboration between different organizations and individuals usually works well at the field level and less well higher up in the hierarchy. In particular, collaboration between different ministries has frequently been found to be problematic (Allison and Zelikow, 1999; Kaarbo and Gruenfeld, 1998). An illustrating example was the Boxing Day tsunami in Southeast Asia in 2004. Of the European countries, Sweden suffered the greatest number of casualties in the tsunami in Thailand (543 dead and 18 still missing). According to a Swedish Governmental Official Report (Swedish Tsunami Commission, 2005), the Swedish rescue operation was delayed approximately 24 hours because of ineffective handling within the government offices. Once initiated, the operational part of the rescue mission has been evaluated as successful (Alvinus *et al.*, 2010).

In response to the severe criticism of the slow reaction at the political level during the tsunami disaster, a new unit was established in the government offices. It was labeled Crisis Coordination Secretariat and was organized directly subordinate to the Prime Minister at the Prime Minister's office (see Figure 1 for an organizational chart).

The main tasks of the Crisis Coordination Secretariat can be summarized as follows: monitoring of risks and threats; alerting political leaders; coordinating crisis preparedness in the government offices; and improving the capacity for crisis management in the government offices (Salomonson, 2007). Since the unit was established in 2008, it has been operational in a number of smaller incidents and they have conducted repeated crisis management training and exercises within the government offices. In 2010, the unit was put to test in a major real life multinational crisis – the ash cloud from the Iceland volcano Eyjafjallajökull.

Typically, studies on crisis management use a single academic discipline such as political science, command and control, psychology, sociology, etc., as point of departure. Studies involving multiple theoretical perspectives are rare. In this case the following three perspectives were selected: governance, command and control, and leadership, because combined we felt they could provide a more holistic picture than a single-perspective study could.

The following three perspectives were chosen in the present study. The governance perspective places analytical focus on the networks that modern administrative systems depend upon to deliver public goods. It charts how information flows through these networks and how authority migrates between nodes as new demands are discovered and resources need to be located within the network (Agranoff and McGuire, 2001; Boin, 2009). The command and control perspective focusses on the command and control system (including, e.g. mandates, methods, organization, and technical support) and gives an insight into the level of preparedness of the different organizations and their interaction. Thus, the focus is less on the capabilities of the involved individuals and their ability to communicate, but more on the “hard” issues (Alberts and Hayes, 2006).

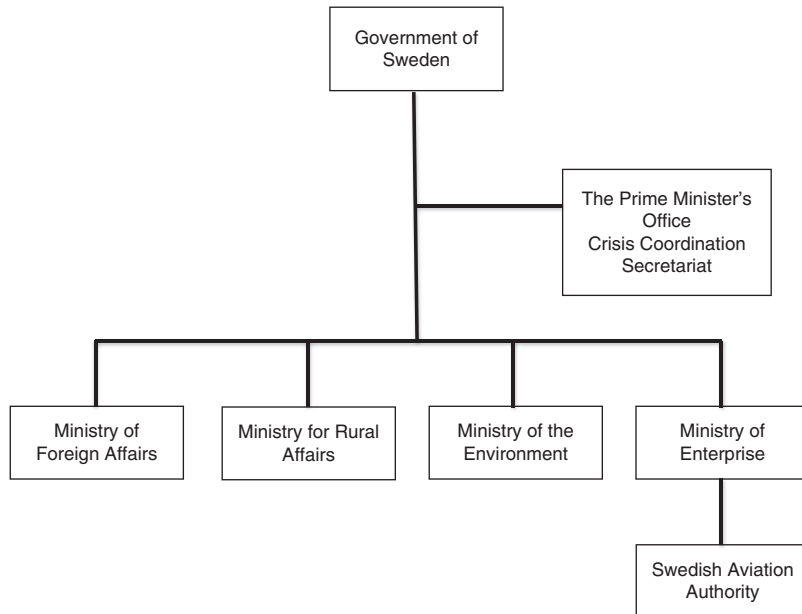


Figure 1.
Organizational chart
showing the position
of the Crisis
Coordination
Secretariat

Note: The ministries and the agency shown in the figure are those where data were collected in the present study

Finally, the leadership perspective, highlights the “soft” side of influence processes in groups (direct leadership) and at higher organizational levels (indirect leadership). Two broad classes of definitions of leadership exist where one focusses on the leader as a person (House *et al.*, 1999) and the other on interpersonal processes between the leader and those being led (Yukl, 2002). The present study is influenced by both approaches to leadership.

Frequently, studies on crisis management deal with problems and failures and focus less on factors that contribute to effective handling. Thus, there is a lack of knowledge of aspects that lead to satisfactory crisis management at the governmental offices level. Therefore, the aim of the present study was to gain a deeper understanding of crisis management at the Swedish Government offices level in an international crisis by using a multiperspective approach, and paying particular attention to factors contributing favorably to the management process.

The ash cloud events have previously been studied from a multinational perspective with regards to legal and organizational issues (Alemanno, 2010), regional cooperation (Nohrstedt, 2013; Parker, 2015) and other national modes of response (Alexander, 2013). This study adds to the response of the Swedish system to developing an image of a truly cross-boundary episode of aviation business continuity.

Method

Selection of organizations and informants

Eight informants representing the following organizations were interviewed: the Crisis Coordination Secretariat – two informants, the manager and the deputy manager/head

of the operational activities during the crisis; The Ministry of Foreign Affairs – one informant, a deputy group manager; The Ministry for Rural Affairs – one informant, the civil servant who was responsible for crisis management; The Ministry of Environment – two informants, one who was the head of the ministry and one who was responsible for contacts with the Swedish Environmental Protection Agency; The Ministry of Enterprise – the civil servant who was responsible for contacts with The Swedish Aviation Authority; and finally The Swedish Aviation Authority – two informants, the director general at the time of the incident and one who was responsible for Swedish air traffic controllers. The selected organizations and individuals were all involved in the crisis management following the volcano eruption. The informants gave their informed consent to participate before the interview.

Data collection

Data were collected by interviews, following a prepared interview guide. The interviews consisted of open-ended questions and individually adapted follow-up questions covering the themes listed below. The themes were derived from the perspectives of governance, command and control, and leadership, respectively, although it should be noted that the borders between these perspectives are diffuse and the same theme can be relevant from more than one perspective. In particular, the selection of themes was inspired by Larsson and Hyllengren's (2013) work on contextual conditions affecting leadership. The interview themes:

- (1) the crisis event – what was most challenging?
- (2) organization:
 - hierarchical control instruments;
 - inter-organizational collaboration; and
 - intra-organizational chain of command and collaboration.
- (3) Group:
 - clear norms and roles, consistent across time;
 - communication; and
 - cohesion.
- (4) Leadership:
 - exemplary model, consideration, and inspiration and motivation;
 - control; and
 - strategic proactivity, anchoring of decisions.

The interviews took place during 2012-2013 at the informants' workplaces. The interviews were recorded and generally lasted between 30 and 60 minutes. All interviews were conducted and analyzed by the authors.

Data analysis

The interviews were transcribed verbatim and, in a first step, examined line by line in order to identify the informants' descriptions of thought patterns, feelings and actions related to the interview themes. In a second step, the meaning units derived this way

were then sorted within the interview themes using the clustering method (Miles and Huberman, 1984). This is a hierarchical structuring procedure where meaning units or codes that are interpreted as being closely related to each other are sorted into clusters, and these clusters are then sorted into successively more comprehensive categories to better understand the phenomenon.

Results

The results will be presented in the following three sections: the Crisis Coordination Secretariat, the ministries, and the agency.

The Crisis Coordination Secretariat

The biggest challenge in connection with the crisis management was the novelty of the episode. In the words of the deputy manager: "It was something completely new, when looked upon as a scenario, it was a new kind of event, new challenges or new demands. To identify what is this? That is, the framing of the problem, what consequences will follow? How long will it last? That was really the biggest challenge/[...]resources were not really a problem." The informant also emphasized that although problematic, the ash cloud did not constitute a serious threat to Sweden or Swedish citizens.

Regarding governance, the informants claimed that the event had no major domestic political weight. Instead, the deputy manager felt that the initiating phase within the government offices was the most demanding: "To make sure that the others (the ministries, our remark) started working on it." The interview continued:

Interviewer: Getting the others kick-started, was it in your mandate to do it or was it based on agreements?

Informant: There is a mission, so there is a mandate to do it, in the Government offices. But still, it's very much about the culture being kind of agreement-oriented, so that was the tool that was used.

Interviewer: Do you use, shall we say, an informal mandate in the first place or do you use a formal mandate? Is it tacitly understood that the Crisis Coordination Secretariat acts at certain times or do you have to hit them in the head with regulations?

Informant: In most cases it is tacitly understood. Someone told me when I began in the Government offices, when I got my business card, "You know that you will never have to raise your voice here because the power in your task rests in the line below your name – Prime Minister's office." By engaging the relevant ministries in coordination meetings and commissioning briefings and reports, focus can be directed to the core issues identified by the coordinating body.

Turning to leadership during the crisis management, the informants claimed that it was mainly experience based. The deputy manager also pointed to the fact that the other actors knew about his crisis management experience and that he perceived that there was an immediate trust. He also mentioned that it was favorable that there was a basic organizational structure which provided a sense of security, but it needed to be modified like in every other unique crisis.

A key leadership aspect was flexibility. The deputy manager pointed out that the bottom line on the business card was not enough. An excerpt: "I often had to accept the other person's opinion and kind of show that I let him/her have it his/her way, and that I understood that there are different ways to do things. You had to sacrifice your own opinion quite a lot. It required real tightrope walking tricks."

Another leadership aspect emphasized by the informants was having knowledge about the system and what the other actors, including the political level, wanted to know during a crisis. It helped them to shortcut the bureaucratic system and act without first asking for permission. Sometimes the actions were not 100 percent correct, but they were good enough. An excerpt interviewer: was that some kind of mantra – good enough?

The deputy manager: It's a mantra I tend to use. In crisis management, good enough is good enough.

The ministries

The informants from the four ministries all agreed that the ash cloud situation was not a big deal in terms of domestic politics. The main task of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs was to assist getting Swedish citizens back home to Sweden. A related task for all the ministries was to help their own employees who were on business trips in the affected region. Typical actions reported by all informants were: to brief the Secretary of State, to exchange information with the other Ministries – “this is how we work”; to make check-lists, to have contacts with their respective agency – “do you need anything?, do we have to do something?”, etc.

The highest stress level was reported by the informant from the Ministry of Enterprise. This was because it was one of their agencies, The Swedish Aviation Authority, which had to handle the most acute demands. This informant had been declutched from all other tasks. An interview excerpt:

Interviewer: Did you have to make any difficult decisions related to the event?

Informant: No, no difficult decisions. But I felt all the time that it was difficult because the situation was, to me, completely new. And it required, if you put it this way, a high amount of improvisation. So each morning I tried to keep my head cool and see “what is happening?”

This informant reported having a lot of contacts with the Crisis Coordination Secretariat. He was satisfied with their crisis management experience and their taking over the dissemination of information.

The Swedish Aviation Authority

The chief of one of the air navigation centrals watched the news about a volcanic eruption on national television. He did not understand the implication for air traffic in Sweden until he was alerted by operators and informed about the ash cloud by Eurocontrol. The chief operator had even recently read about how an ash cloud over Europe could harm air traffic, but did not think of it initially. When it was understood that the cloud drifted toward Sweden, the operators read formal instructions on how to act, participated in telephone conferences with Eurocontrol and received ash maps from The Met Office in the UK. Based on that information, they could decide when to “shut down” the air space. The Malmö (major Swedish city) Air Traffic Service took the lead and discussed when to shut down air sectors with other air traffic services in Sweden. The decision making was not hierarchical, The Malmö Air Traffic Service chiefs got the lead in the situation based on initiative, rather than on position in the hierarchy. It was important to have support from the Transport Agency in the decision to shut down the air space.

The main task during the incident was to collect and evaluate data on the risks of flying, using a broad international professional network. The pressure from the airline

companies was severe at times but the director general kept cool – “there is nothing we can do about it.” The ash cloud was compared to a fog or snow storm with long duration.

The Aviation Authority gave itself responsibility of opening and closing the air space the first few days, although this is not their responsibility. The operators perceived it as their responsibility to stop giving navigation services, in areas with ash in the air. This made the agency practically able to close or open the air space, as the vast majority of the air traffic needed the navigation services. After that, the agency worked to put the focus on The Transport Agency instead, who has the legal mandate to open or close the airspace.

Respondent from the Aviation Authority: we were stuck in between, we had to force through The Transport Agency up on stage, and we said they are the ones responsible for the regulations, we are only following the existing regulations. It was important that we managed to get this through [...] [that] we have not closed any air space, we are not stopping anyone from flying, we are only following the regulations.

The civil servant at the Ministry of Enterprise responsible for the contact with the Aviation Authority did not see any problems in the agency’s management of the event.

Discussion

The aim was to gain a deeper understanding of crisis management the Swedish Government offices level in an international crisis by using a multiperspective approach, and paying particular attention to factors contributing favorably to the crisis management process. Overall, the handling of the ash cloud crisis by the Swedish Government offices was regarded as satisfactory by all informants, as well as by the media during the crisis. However, the International Air Transport Association complained against the air traffic regulations, accusing European governments of exaggerating the threat and imposing rigid air traffic regulations (www.iata.org/pressroom/pr/Pages/2010-04-19-01.aspx).

From a governance perspective, the inter-agency collaboration between the Crisis Coordination Secretariat and the Ministries worked smoothly. The Secretariat gathered previously selected and trained crisis management representatives from the different Ministries and continued to follow-up these contacts. The crisis management individuals who were responsible in turn, informed their respective Secretaries of State and continued with daily exchange of information between each other. Informal check-ups were also made with their respective underlying agencies.

From a command and control perspective, the handling of the crisis did not seem to evoke any serious obstacles. The mandate and role of the different actors were clear and no instance of serious conflict regarding division of responsibility was reported. The informants at the Ministries were well aware of the risk of direct agency steering. They explicitly declared that their check-up contacts with their respective agencies were informal and that they did not interfere with how the agencies solved their tasks.

The rapid forming of groups to solve a task, e.g. in a crisis, is not a new phenomenon (see George, 1980; Hyllengren *et al.*, 2011; Janis, 1972; ‘t Hart *et al.*, 1993) but there are some noteworthy aspects in this case. At the Swedish Government Offices, a staff is summoned to handle incidents that may lead to a crisis, which happens roughly five to ten times annually. When the need for a staff is identified by the manager on call, the available personnel will be summoned and form the staff. Reinforcements are available according to a predesigned process. The duties of the staff members will then be decided according to the needs of the particular event. This means that staff members

will be allocated tasks that are quite far from their everyday work and expertise, but that is exercised routinely. This differs from the way a military staff is organized, where personnel is allocated and trained for certain tasks long before a mission (see e.g. North Atlantic Treaty Organization, 2010). It also differs from how an inter-organizational staff is usually organized in a crisis, where personnel from each organization are given the role of being an expert in the field of their respective organization. They therefore usually immediately accept their role. Another important difference is that the calling of the staff is made early when the gravity of the crisis is yet unknown. The staff members and other organizations affected therefore may or may not consider the crisis to be acute. These differences in role acceptance and variations in subjective awareness of the severity of the crisis was pointed out in the interviews as a topic that requires special attention to the leadership skills of the manager on call and, ultimately, the director general for crisis coordination.

We will now turn to a leadership-oriented perspective to identify some potential reasons as to why the crisis management apparently worked well. First, the repeated pre-crisis training and exercises led by the Crisis Coordination Secretariat implied that the crisis management responsible persons at the different Ministries knew each other and had a general mental crisis readiness, although this particular source was new. McEntire (1998) notes that coordination will be increasingly relevant in disaster response operations when there have been some sort of pre-disaster ties between the agencies involved. These ties help generate familiarity with one another and help develop norms that emphasize collaboration. Using Perrow's (1999) term, the preparations could be said to have made the inter-agency couplings between the key actors more flexible.

Second, the combined effect of the hard power (mandate) of the Crisis Coordination Secretariat resulting from the placement directly below the Prime Minister on the one hand, and the soft power (smoothness) used by the actors at the Secretariat on the other, was favorable. Neither source of power alone would probably have been sufficient. Nye (2008) labels the combination of hard and soft power "smart power." He claims that soft power, which entails making others desire the same outcome as you, is a tool of seduction and that seduction is often more powerful than coercion.

Nye (2008) suggests that successful use of smart power requires an understanding of the context, so called "contextual intelligence." This has been described by Mayo (2006) as the ability to understand an evolving context and to be able to capitalize on trends. This was clearly illustrated in the present study by the informant from the Crisis Coordination Secretariat when he emphasized the importance of knowing the system and what other actors want from you.

The description of flexibility provided by the informant from the Secretariat fits well with Alvinus *et al.*'s (2014) conceptualization of cultural and structural smoothness. Cultural smoothness facilitates interaction in a given context. Structural smoothness aims to uphold the hierarchical structure that largely characterizes the collaborators' world view. Both kinds of smoothness were reported by the informant from the Secretariat. As can be seen in the Results section, this smoothness required considerable effort on part of the informant. Freedom from prestige to have it your own way, and the ability to acknowledge the usefulness of the other person's way, is our interpretation of this kind of smoothness at the individual level. At the organizational level, we suggest that it illustrates an approach that could be assumed to contribute to a more open emotional climate, an altered emotional regime (Reddy, 2001).

With regard to a central crisis management task in the ash cloud crisis – sense making – the Swedish system performed fairly rapidly, although not without value conflicts. Getting civilian (and military) traffic in the air was a pressing need that could not happen at the expense of the credibility of the aviation safety regime that had been built over many years. The slow and largely consensual process by which air space reopened was a functional way to do this. At no point did other central issues (such as the survival of flag carrier SAS) interfere with that strategy. Relying on the international regulatory bodies had the dual benefits of pushing proper risk assessment as well as showing a common resolve to effectively handle the problem (see Alexander, 2013).

Two additional potential sources of the satisfactory crisis management should be addressed. First, the well known and extensive crisis management experience of the deputy manager of the Crisis Coordination Secretariat appeared to create an immediate trust in the others when the Secretariat took the initiative to set up an early meeting. This trust probably contributed to confidence building and a collaboration focus (cf. Fors Brandebo *et al.*, 2013). Second, the character of the crisis itself probably made smooth collaboration easier. Although severely troublesome for air transportation, it was not a question of an imminent threat to lives or core societal functions. Rather, for the actors involved at the government offices, it could be described as a moderately intense crisis. There was enough time for planning, information sharing and collaboration and few difficult decisions had to be made.

An explicit part of the aim of the study was to pay particular attention to factors that contributed favorably to the management of crisis. Given this, the favorable aspects discussed above can be summarized as follows:

- the character of the crisis – there was no imminent threat to lives or core societal functions;
- pre-crisis selection and training of crisis management responsible persons creating a collaboration-oriented mind set and tighter inter-agency couplings;
- clear roles and mandates;
- smart power – the combination of the hard power of the Crisis Coordination Secretariat resulting from the placement directly below the Prime Minister and the flexibility (soft power) used by the actors at the Secretariat; and
- the extensive crisis management experience of the deputy manager of the Crisis Coordination Secretariat which was well known and contributed to trust, confidence building and collaboration.

The four last-mentioned points in the summary list represent our recommendation of practical implications from the study results.

Methodologically, this limited case study suffers from all well-known limitations of qualitative research. The study relies on retrospective, self-reported data only from a limited group of informants. These may be inaccurate and a broader range of data would have been desirable. It is also inherent in the chosen method that a little is known about the generalizability of the results. The two main strengths of the study are the depth one can reach with individual interviews and the broader interview guide and interpretation framework we obtained by combining elements from the disciplines governance, command and control, and leadership. Given the difficulties to standardize crisis management research, our main suggestion for future research is to continue with the multiperspective case approach in different kinds of crises.

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