

Crisis preparedness of government departments in Australia¹

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Abstract

A survey of Australian government communicators ($n = 45$) at a 2008 conference on crisis preparedness and management has shown that more than 80% of departments had a crisis management plan and that 90% of these plans were tested at least once a year. Almost 70% of those surveyed were 'very confident' or 'somewhat confident' in their crisis management plans, even though 44% felt that the level of senior management support for crisis planning was not sufficient. The research supported previous US research (Cloudman & Hallahan, 2006) that showed that the level of crisis preparedness (measured by the presence of crisis management and business continuity plans, frequency of drills based on the plans, the level of incorporation of disaster into the plans, frequency of plan review and confidence with crisis management planning) was related to the size of the organisation and the size of its communication function. The size of the organization also seemed to be a predictor of confidence in crisis planning and preparedness, with 13 of the 19 (68.4%) respondents that reported that they were 'very confident' or 'somewhat confident' in their crisis preparations coming from organizations larger than 500 employees.

1. Introduction

The level of crisis preparedness from a communication point of view has been the subject of substantial discussion for some time (2002), but the preparedness of government agencies for crises has really only been explored by Horsley and Barker (1997) and Rosenthal and Kouzmin (Lee, 2009). This is despite the fact that government crises are reported on by mainstream media every day while private sector crises arise less often (1997). This study examines the propensity for government agencies in Australia to have a crisis management plan that is practiced and reviewed, and explores predictors for crisis preparedness among government departments.

2. Crisis communication

Organisational crises are generally characterised by sudden events that create uncertainty and threaten the most important goals of the organisation (2006). Organisations that do not have a crisis management capability are more likely to fail as a result of the crisis than organisations that have prepared for the worst. While a government department will continue to function following a crisis by virtue of the need for the services it provides, a crisis can have a serious impact on the legitimacy of that agency. Rosenthal and Kouzmin (2006) maintain that a crisis can:

- a) raise questions about the agency's effectiveness and ability to prevent a recurrence of the crisis;
- b) imply that the agency and its government is not always functional or beneficial;

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- c) be exacerbated by the tendency of crises in a political sphere to turn from “occasions for decisions” to an opportunity to restructure power relations; and
- d) highlight the dysfunctional nature of interagency co-operation.

Cloudman and Hallahan (2008), in their study of 126 US organizations, found that three quarters had a written plan and Lee et al’s study of 122 organisations found that 79% had a crisis plan.

3. Method

To test the crisis preparedness of government agencies in Australia, a survey was designed using a 19 item scale for distribution at the Emergency Media and Public Affairs Conference in Queensland in 2008. The sample size was 88 delegates, 46 of which completed and returned the questionnaire. The geographic origins of respondents was investigated, with the highest number, but not the majority, coming from Queensland, the host state (28%). Details of origins are shown in the table below.

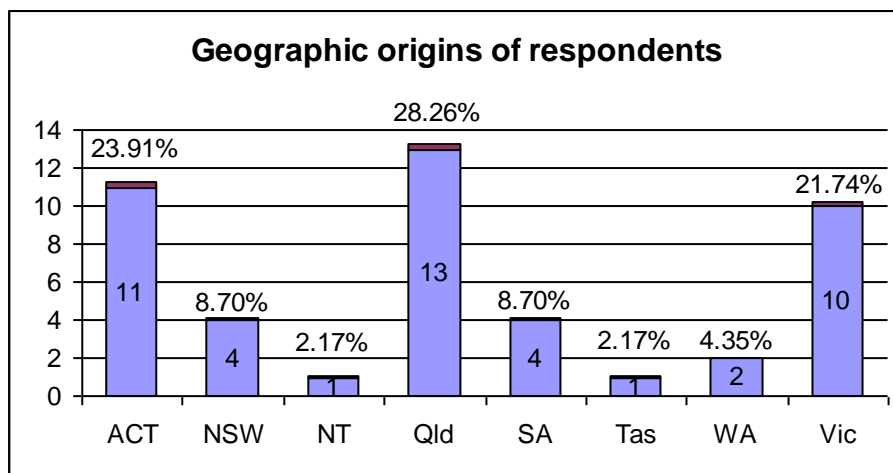


Table 1: Geographic origins of survey respondents

The data was “cleaned” of those responses that came from employees from the private sector ($n = 3$), educational institutions ($n = 3$) and ‘other’ ($n = 3$), leaving total responses of 37.

The questions were developed from a review of the literature, with questions clustered loosely around the list of activities that best demonstrated crisis preparedness developed by Cloudman and Hallahan . These were: presence of a written plan; tactical preparedness; training; maintenance of contact lists, media monitoring; quality of organisational-public relationships; confidence in the organisation’s ability to respond; organisation size, type and scope; communication autonomy and delegation of authority; and process orientation.

An assumption was made that tactical preparedness, maintenance of contact lists and media monitoring were included within the crisis management plans of the organizations to be studied as recommended by Burke (Berger & Reber, 2006). Burke maintained that a crisis management manual should outline the details and structure of and procedures to be followed by the crisis management team, name the spokesperson by position, outline resourcing of the crisis management team, include agendas and checklists for use by the crisis management team, and include up to date contact lists for key stakeholders . On reflection, questions could have

been included about the specific technical aspects of crisis preparedness and the failure to include these is a limitation of the research.

A second limitation of this research was that the sampling of respondents was based on convenience; because of the nature of the conference it would be reasonable to expect that the delegates were more involved in crisis or emergency communication than the general public relations population. This could, therefore, provide skewed data. Thirdly, some questions were not answered by all respondents.

4. Research Questions

The following questions were developed:

- a. Are Australian government departments active in planning for crisis?
- b. Are there relationships between organisational factors and crisis readiness?
- c. Is there a relationship between crisis readiness and senior management support for crisis management?
- d. Are emergency agencies more crisis ready than other government departments?

5. Findings

Of the 37 respondents, 24% ($n = 9$) came from emergency agencies and 76% ($n = 28$) were from non-emergency government departments. 74% ($n = 28$) identified themselves as communicators or public relations practitioners with the remainder employed as educators (2.7%), operational personnel (5.3%) and 'other' (16.2%), which included a policy officer, corporate governance and risk specialist and a combination of some of the above, including four communications/education workers.

The respondents' positions within their organisation were predominantly in middle management or at the technical level: 16.2% indicated they were at director level ($n = 6$), 29.7% were managers ($n = 11$), 21.6% were team leaders ($n = 8$) and 32.4% ($n = 12$) were team members.

The majority of organizations were large: 72.2% of respondents indicated that their organisation employed more than 501 people ($n = 26$). None were smaller than 20 employees, although organizations of 20-100 staff was the next largest group at 13.9% ($n = 5$). Information was sought on the size of communications teams: by far the largest number of respondents (35.1%) reported working in a team of 21 or more people. The next most common communications team sizes were 16-20 and 6-10 (both 13.5%) and then teams of two, four and five (10.8% each).

Just over 91% of organizations ($n = 33$) had a crisis plan: 25 of these were government departments (75% of all organizations with a plan) and eight were emergency agencies (24%). 27 of those with a plan tested their plans using scenarios, with 44.4% undertaking testing annually. The same number tested their plans quarterly or every six months. Confidence in crisis readiness was also tested. Only three respondents (8.8%), were 'very confident' of their level of preparedness in relation to their plans and the planning and review processes around these although the majority, 55.8% ($n = 19$) were 'somewhat confident'. 30% of respondents ($n = 12$) had reservations about their preparation for a crisis.

a. Are Australian government departments active in planning for crisis?

It would seem that most non-emergency government departments are active when it comes to crisis planning, given that 25 out of 28 respondents (89%) indicated that their department had a crisis management plan, and that 20 (71%) of these tested their plan using scenarios, and that 17 of these conducted scenarios at least once a year and 11 conducting scenarios more often than once a year.

However, the research showed that the involvement of communicators was not planned past the initial crisis and into post-crisis recovery. While 86% ($n = 31$) of respondents reported that their government department had a business continuity plan, only 14 of these respondents had read the plan.

b. Are there relationships between organisational factors and crisis readiness?

The research supported Cloudman and Hallahan's findings that the size of the organisation points to a propensity to be better prepared for a crisis. In this survey, 24 of 33 respondents (73%) who reported that the organisation had a crisis management plan came from organisations larger than 501 people. In addition, the size of the public relations team may have a positive relationship to crisis readiness. 35.5% ($n = 11$) of the respondents whose organisation had a crisis management plan came from a team of 21 or more communicators. 16% ($n = 5$) came from teams of 16-20 and 6 to 10, and one respondent came from a team of 11-15. The remaining 29% ($n = 5$) came from public relations teams of two to five people.

The size of the organization also seemed to be a predictor of confidence in crisis planning and preparedness. Of the 19 respondents with crisis management plans who were 'very confident' or 'somewhat confident' in their crisis preparations, 13 came from organizations larger than 500 employees.

c. Is there a relationship between crisis readiness and senior management support for crisis management in government departments?

A tenuous relationship was identified by the data between the possession of a crisis management plan, positive or negative management support and confidence of practitioners in the crisis readiness of their organization. Only three out of 18 of those with a crisis plan and what they felt was sufficient support of management were 'very confident' in their planning processes and 10 'somewhat confident'. Three respondents had reservations about their readiness, despite the presence of a crisis management plan and the support of senior management (one had no opinion and one did not supply an answer). Of those who felt their senior staff did not support their crisis planning and who had a crisis management plan, six were 'somewhat confident' and eight had 'some reservations' about their planning processes and subsequent crisis management. Overall, those with positive management support were more positive about their readiness, but this was not by a margin that was definitive.

This is better illustrated below:

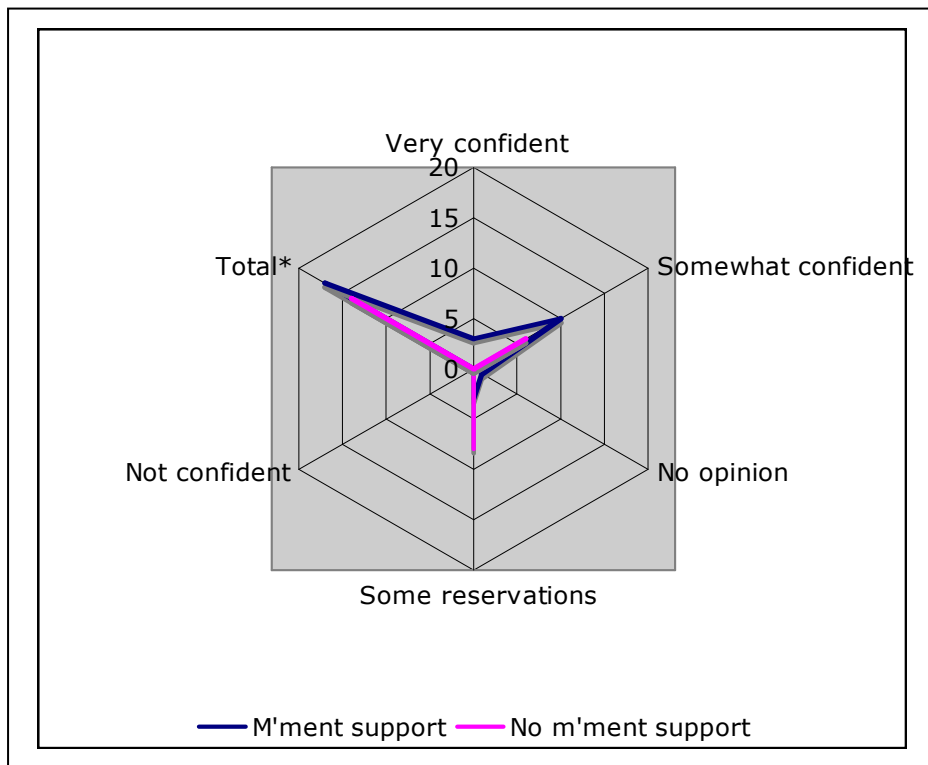


Figure 1: Relationship between confidence in crisis planning and senior management support amongst government departments that have a crisis management plan. *Two respondents who said their organization had a crisis management plan did not participate in the management involvement question.

d. Are emergency agencies more crisis-ready than other government departments?

The survey indicated that emergency agencies are more crisis ready than other government departments. 89% ($n = 8$) of the respondents from emergency agencies said their organizations had crisis management plans, had the support of senior management in crisis planning and that they (the respondents) were 'very confident' or 'somewhat confident' in their plans and processes for crisis management. This indicates a high level of crisis readiness, based on Cloudman and Hallahan's model for crisis readiness outlined earlier. While 92.5% of government departments that were not emergency agencies ($n = 25$) had crisis plans in place, 44% of respondents ($n = 11$) had reservations about how well these plans and their review processes would prepare them well for a crisis. The same number felt they did not have sufficient support from senior management for their crisis planning activity.

6. Conclusion

While government departments in Australia, and emergency agencies in particular, seem reasonably ready for a crisis, there is still room for improvement. The relatively regular and widespread use of scenario planning to test plans is heartening. However, the perception of respondents that there was some lack of senior management support is cause for concern, but it is also a problem that has been an ongoing dilemma for public relations practitioners since the birth of organisational communication . This, combined with the highly concerning lack of involvement of communicators in business continuity planning might be solved by continued

development of communication as a strategic tool and efforts by practitioners to provide counsel as well technical expertise in crisis and day-to-day organisational communication.

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