

# “READINESS”: A keystone concept beyond organizational crisis preparedness and resilience

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## Abstract

Driven by the academia-industry co-identified need to discover new keystones for optimizing organizational crisis communication and management decision-making, this concept paper proposes a new “READINESS” model. Grounded in the organizational preparedness and resilience literature and drawing predominantly from crisis communication and strategic conflict management elements, READINESS is examined as a multidimensional construct with multilevel efficacy, mental adaptability, and emotional leadership-focused mindset, with a dynamic process-driven agility at its core. Another tenet is that READINESS is not just for crises but also essential to manage threats, risks, conflicts, and crises across the board, constantly shaped by complex informational environments and polarizing socio-political issues. We begin by articulating READINESS and then illustrate its application in sticky crisis situations, followed by directions for future research, practice, and training innovation and optimization.

## KEYWORDS

preparedness, readiness, resilience

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

Within the crisis context, there is a concern that people will not carry out required tasks. That includes constituents heeding safety warnings that say to not eat a contaminated food product and crisis teams executing the tasks necessary to manage the crisis. We need to understand why people do or do not perform desired actions. When it comes to actions by organizational actors, performance of a task is linked to training and motivation. Proper training means the person has been taught the skills and knowledge necessary giving them the ability to perform the task while motivation is the willingness to perform the task. The discussion of training and

motivation reflects the difference between preparation and READINESS. Preparation means a crisis team has the skills, knowledge, and ability to manage a crisis, while READINESS is the mental state of being willing to engage the crisis. We believe READINESS is an underappreciated and underdeveloped concept within crisis management. While some research has addressed crisis readiness (e.g., Parnell et al., 2010; Parnell & Crandall, 2021), there is still much more exploration needed on the topic.

Furthermore, this topic is essential to the challenges of “sticky crisis.” Sticky crises are severe, recurring, and complex crises that cause ripple effects, resulting in ancillary crises simultaneously and impacting organizations and industries alike (Reber et al., 2021).

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According to Reber et al. (2021): “Sticky crises demand not only a near-instant response, but they may require crisis communicators to see possibilities, understand the potential breadth and scope of an emerging crisis, and be ready to change strategy and tactics quickly” (p. 7). To tackle these types of sticky crisis challenges, organizations and industries across sectors and geographical market boundaries need to collaborate and coordinate to devise a crisis prevention and preparation-focused managerial system, to better see around the corner and get ready. Then, the next big questions, for practitioners and scholars alike, are how to get ready, how to know we are ready, and how to define and measure READINESS.

At the Crisis Communication Think Tank (CCTT) “Keystone” themed member gathering in April 2023, “READINESS” was initially identified as a key concept, from the military training context, first by practitioner members, followed by strong echoing from scholar members, as one of the primary keystones for crisis management. Interestingly, we have seen an evolving set of analogies practitioners use to describe the roles and functions of crisis managers, from “emergency room (ER) doctors,” which is primarily reactive crisis responses focused, to “preventative healthcare experts,” emphasizing crisis prevention and preparation via regular risk assessment and proactively having crisis risk checkups. Now, we initiate a process of explication and application of a new keystone concept, “READINESS,” not from the healthcare or medical emergency domain, but from military physiology and mentality drawing the parallels of other analogies used by crisis managers such as “war room.”

In this concept paper, we first introduce the READINESS concept in crisis management based on the CCTT’s 2024 theme public announcement (CCTT, 2023) (see Figure 1). We then review relevant

literature to see how predominant crisis theories might naturally supply key elements to grow the READINESS branches and what makes READINESS different from preparedness and resilience. From there, we present our conceptual model for READINESS and lay the foundations for how to further refine the explication of this new keystone concept in benchmarking organizational performance and providing overarching guidelines for organizations to get ready for “sticky crisis” challenges (Jin et al., 2021).

## 1.1 | Crisis preparedness and resilience: Building blocks for READINESS

Rooted in military physiology and resilience and modern warfare operations, Nindl et al. (2018) described the warfare environments as “volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous” (p. 1116), which mirror the definition of “sticky crisis” situations as Reber et al. (2021) defined. The challenges of such environments are accompanied by “physical exertion, cognitive overload, sleep restriction, and caloric deprivation” (p. 1116) among military personnel. At the individual practitioner level and at the organizational level, the ongoing crisis communication process is also insinuated with exertion, overload, and fatigue (Lu & Jin, 2022).

As Nindl et al. (2018) further articulated: “The increasingly fast-paced nature of these operations requires military personnel to demonstrate readiness and resilience in the face of stressful environments to maintain optimal cognitive and physical performance necessary for success” (p. 1116). Crisis managers and organizational decision-making teams across levels can relate to this high level of stress and need to optimize decision-making performance in an



In analyzing global crises over the course of the past year, the CCTT has identified “Readiness” as a key trend for the future of crisis management research and practice. Readiness refers to the ability of an organization to effectively respond in preparing for and managing a crisis situation. Surpassing mere preparedness, readiness encompasses the initial planning stages to summon a state of action.

Just as a compass enables the intrepid traveler to venture forth, a state of readiness empowers crisis practitioners to confront unforeseen challenges and obstacles. Readiness is a proactive approach, involving the preparation of relevant plans, resources and organizational capabilities. When done properly, crisis practitioners can address and mitigate the impact of a crisis on an organization’s reputation, stakeholders and operations.

FIGURE 1 READINESS (CCTT, 2023).

ongoing, dynamic process as a crisis evolves. Resilience is defined as “the capacity to overcome the negative effects of setbacks and associated stress on the performance,” which is “a complex process involving not only an individual's physiology and psychology, but the influence of factors such as sex, environment, and training” (Nindl et al., 2018, p. 1116). Interestingly, the three key concepts (i.e., readiness, preparedness, and resilience) are referred to but not differentiated, other than positing that resilience will contribute to readiness. Additionally, Nindl et al.'s (2018) work focuses on the key domains of “resilience” not “READINESS.” Therefore, the questions of “what is READINESS” and “how we know we are ready” are yet to be answered. To help fill this conceptual gap, in the following sections, we examine crisis management literature on preparedness (especially on organizational preparedness strategies) and review key building blocks for READINESS grounded in predominant crisis management theories and frameworks.

## 1.2 | Predominant preparedness strategies

When all major social challenges are addressed by organizations (which is what we observe in contemporary society today), we depend to an unprecedented level on these organizations surviving the crisis and handling it appropriately (Faustenhammer & Gössler, 2011). As a result, preparing for crises plays a vital role in crisis management, implying that we need to “give serious consideration to strong, well-resourced and forward thinking contingency planning if we want to tame and gain control over a crisis when it hits” (McConnell & Drennan, 2006, p. 59). In other words, the damage of a crisis can be mitigated or lessened when organizations practice proactive preparation for the crisis. On the contrary, when crisis preparedness is absent or not handled in a productive way, crisis management effectiveness becomes a matter of chance (Fowler et al., 2007).

In a practical sense, high levels of crisis preparedness are not ‘mission impossible,’ but also not easy to achieve (McConnell & Drennan, 2006). Organizations often face tensions between the ideals of crisis preparedness and the realities of crisis, including for example high potential impact of crises versus low prioritization of emergency management and the need for planning and order versus uncertainty and disorder of crisis. Their struggle is further compounded by the realities of institutional fragmentation and conflicting interests within organizations (Carmeli & Schaubroeck, 2008). To combat uncertainty and disorder of crises, improving crisis preparedness should not only be seen by organizational leaders as a high priority (Ulmer, 2012) but also involve integration and synergy across organizational networks and active preparation through organizational training (McConnell & Drennan, 2006).

Accordingly, researchers in public relations advocated the importance for organizations to develop a crisis plan, maintain a crisis team, formulate comprehensive training programs, and engage in such training frequently (Jin et al., 2017). For example, Zerfass et al. (2010) proposed a five-step strategy to help organizations

prepare for rising crises effectively, involving (1) developing effective crisis communication plans for action, (2) using issue scanning and monitoring technologies to identify and track potential problems, (3) providing employees with training for crisis management procedures, (4) educating stakeholders about emergency communications and related response systems, and (5) implementing effective issues management program to reduce the risk of crises. This strategy emphasizes the active role that organizations should play in precrisis preparation and addresses the three components (i.e., identification, confrontation, and reconfiguration) in the crisis management model suggested by Burnett (1998).

Some scholars regard crisis preparedness as a process of planning and draw attention to how to preplan and coordinate rapid response efforts and to train experts and develop a fully staffed workforce. For example, Cloudman and Hallahan (2006) proposed five indicators of crisis preparedness: presence of a written plan, tactical preparedness, training, maintenance of contact lists, and media monitoring. Similarly, Avery and Park (2019) argued that a crisis plan should include templates for messages from spokespeople, draft press releases, and social media messaging plans. However, organizations involved in costly activities such as training and exercises for precrisis planning may produce a level of ‘symbolic readiness’ that does not always reflect operational realities (McConnell & Drennan, 2006). Therefore, planning for risk situations and emergency preparedness should be more than blind adherence to going by the book (Enander et al., 2015). Personal awareness, creativity, commitment, and abilities among those in positions of responsibility also play a vital role in ensuring the organization's viability (Somers & Svara, 2009).

Boin and Lagadec (2000) thus posited that crisis preparedness is not simply about precrisis planning. It also entails anticipation and developing strategies to ensure organizational resilience. This corresponds to the ‘anticipatory focus’ posited by Coombs (2016), suggesting that the focus of crisis management should “move beyond a preoccupation with reputation repair strategies and consider the value of instructing and adjusting information” (p. 122). In theory and practice alike, we have observed a shift toward the anticipatory focus of precrisis preparedness from a concentration on media monitoring, response, and detailed planning to a more complex strategy based on research and decision-making (Avery & Park, 2019; Olaniran & Williams, 2012). Jin (2010a) described this trend as understanding crisis preparedness not only at a tangible tactical level but also at “a cognitive process and assessment-based strategic level” (p. 50). This evolving focus was accompanied by enhanced attention to a variety of crisis-related factors, including risk, vulnerability, and unique demands of different crisis types. In theory, the crisis and emergency risk communication model in the health context (Reynolds & W. Seeger, 2005) and the situational crisis communication theory in the public relations field (Coombs, 2007) are two widely recognized frameworks for understanding this dynamic and for anticipating how stakeholders will react to a crisis in terms of the threat posed by the crisis. In practice, crisis-prepared organizations exhibit an anticipatory mindset, proactively monitoring their operations and investing

heavily in prevention and risk management activities (Carmeli & Schaubroeck, 2008). In comparison, other organizations that are crisis-prone engage in precrisis preparation only to the extent that it is cost-effective in the short term (Carmeli & Schaubroeck, 2008).

In summary, previous literature tends to agree that crisis preparedness can be minimally characterized as measures that are of an active, continuous, and anticipatory nature (Staupe-Delgado & Kruke, 2017). It also points out the need to move beyond treating crisis preparedness in a 'cookbook' fashion where the emphasis is drawn on elaborating the tasks needed for damage control and reputation repair, making it centered on operationalization (Kirschenbaum, 2002). In other words, being prepared also refers to a measurable state of READINESS—equipping the organization with systems and procedures so that responses are appropriate, sufficient, and timely (Cloudman & Hallahan, 2006).

### 1.3 | Readiness elements from situational crisis communication theory

Situational crisis communication theory (SCCT) was developed to help crisis managers select optimal crisis response strategies. An optimal crisis response serves to maximize the benefits to constituents affected by the crisis and the organization in crisis (Claeys & Coombs, 2020). SCCT holds that the ethical base response is the first response anytime a crisis involves the safety of constituents. The ethical base response makes sure people know what to do to protect themselves physically from the crisis and provides a message designed to help people cope psychologically with a crisis. Once the ethical base response is provided, managers can add crisis response strategies intended to manage social evaluations and other potential negative crisis outcomes for the organization in crisis. The key piece of advice is that the crisis response must become more accommodative as perceptions of organizational responsibility for the crisis increase (Coombs & Holladay, 2002; Coombs, 1995; Coombs, 2007).

SCCT advice should be included in crisis training. SCCT is a way to build crisis response skills, hence is a form of preparation. However, SCCT assumes READINESS on the part of the crisis managers. But are crisis managers ready to use the optimal crisis response strategies? Unfortunately, the answer to that question is often "no." Even when crisis managers know what the optimal crisis response should be, many are not willing to actually utilize it (Claeys & Coombs, 2020). READINESS could be part of the answer to the question of why crisis managers often use suboptimal crisis responses. Consider the case of Volkswagen (VM) and its emission scandal. The optimal response would have been to accept responsibility for the emission-cheating software and compensate VW owners for the problems the software had caused. It is reasonable to assume those managing the crisis at VW knew what the optimal response would be. Instead, the VW crisis response was to blame a few rouge engineers for the problem—a suboptimal response using a form of scapegoating. The result of the suboptimal response was increased media scrutiny of VW and the crisis being prolonged (e.g.,

Raupp, 2019). Ideally, crisis responses improve the crisis situation for all involved but the VW response made it worse for all involved in the crisis. A comprehensive perspective on READINESS would provide one means of understanding why organizations like VW might choose a suboptimal crisis response when they should know what constitutes an optimal crisis response in the given crisis situation.

### 1.4 | Readiness elements from the contingency theory of strategic conflict management

The contingency theory of strategic conflict management (thereafter the contingency theory) (originated by Cancel et al., 1997, 1999) captures the complex nature of the reality of public relations and communication management practice (including crisis management) by exploring the optimization of conflict positioning, stance taking and strategic responses to issues or problems with their publics could be more dynamic (Pang et al., 2023a, 2023b), which essentially reflect the need for practitioners and organizations to be ready in a complex and dynamic environment. The contingency theory offers a matrix of 87 factors, arranged thematically, that an organization can draw on to determine its optimal position and response, from advocacy to accommodation, in a given situation at a given time with a given primary public (Pang et al., 2023a, 2023b).

Seeking to understand the dynamics inside and outside an organization that could affect its stance, the contingency theory further elaborates and specifies the conditions and forces underneath stance and strategy decision-making processes and outcomes (Cancel et al., 1999; Yarbrough et al., 1998), driving the shape and status of varied conflict crisis READINESS, including:

#### 1.4.1 | Predisposing versus situational factors

Predisposing variables influence the organization's position on the continuum before it interacts with a public, while situational variables influence the organization's position on the continuum during interaction with its publics. As Cancel et al. (1999) reported, first, well-supported predisposing factors include (a) the size of the organization, (b) corporate culture, (c) business exposure, (d) strategic communication to dominant coalition, (e) dominant coalition enlightenment, and (f) characteristics of key individuals, like the CEO; second, well-supported predisposing factors are (a) urgency of the situation, (b) characteristics of the opposing public, (c) potential or obvious threats, and (d) potential costs or benefit for the organization of choosing the various stances. Both predisposing and situational variables could move the organization toward increased accommodation or advocacy.

#### 1.4.2 | Proscriptive variables

To further explore whether organizational communication can still take place with a morally repugnant public, Cameron et al. (2001)

identified occasions when accommodation is impossible for moral, legal, and regulatory reasons. The six proscriptive variables are: (1) when moral conviction held that an accommodative or dialogic stance towards a public may be inherently unethical, (2) when maintaining moral neutrality in the face of contending publics was necessary, (3) when legal constraints curtailed accommodation, (4) when regulatory restraints existed, (5) when senior management prohibited an accommodative stance, and (6) when the issue became a jurisdictional concern within the organization and resolution of the issue took on a constrained and complex process of negotiation.

### 1.4.3 | Ethical variables

Pang et al. (2010) called for identifying ethical variables and adding them to the contingent factor matrix. The six suggested factors, posited as influencing an organization's stance before it engages with any communication with affected publics, are (1) the role of public relations practitioners, (2) the role of top management, (3) exposure of organizational business and cultural diversity, (4) government influence and intervention, (5) nature of the crisis, and (6) stakeholder activism. Through the practitioners' lens and practices, an organization's ethical communication in times of escalated conflicts (e.g., a crisis) is evidenced in communicating with publics with accurate and timely information, throughout the crisis cycle, transparently, responsibly, and honestly; it is also essential to integrate ethical considerations in overall business strategy and the long-term reputational well-being plan for the organization (Pang et al., 2020). Recently, Voges et al. (2022) went back to the original contingent factor matrix and dived deeper into the understanding of the role of personal ethics (Cancel et al., 1997) in senior communication executives' organizational stance decision-making during organization-public conflicts. Through a conjoint analysis, Voges et al. (2022) examined: (1) the relative importance of and dynamics between three key contingent factors (i.e., external threats, organizational characteristics, and dominant coalition characteristics), (2) the influence of individual characteristics (e.g., gender, experience, and personal ethics) in stance decision-making process, and (3) how different types of organizational stances are determined by these contingent factors and individual characteristics in different conflict situations. Individual characteristics (i.e., gender, ethics, social responsibility, whistleblowing tendencies, and over 20 years in the communications field) were found to be influential in driving these communication executives' strategic conflict management decision-making.

## 2 | "READINESS": A NEW CONCEPTUAL MODEL

Rooted deeply in the contingency theory, threat is a key contingent factor that exerts internal and external influences on organizational stance movements and crisis response strategies. Jin and Cameron (2007) posited a threat appraisal model, constructed on assessments of situational demands and organizational resources. As related to the

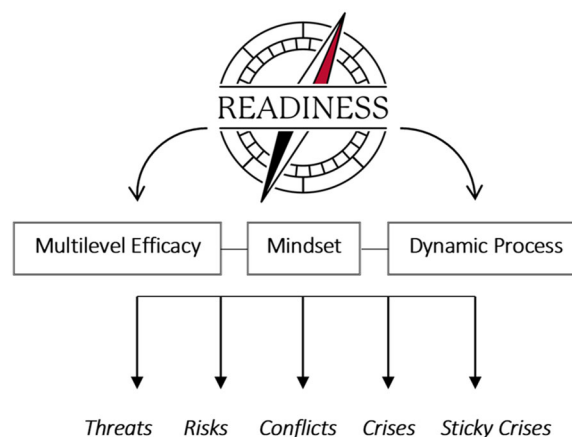


FIGURE 2 READINESS model.

READINESS concept, Jin et al. (2012) argued that threat assessment is essential for precrisis management, further explicating the dimensionality of threats as threat duration, severity, and type. Recently, Coombs and Tachkova (2022) elaborated the concept of threat by integrating moral outrage and SCCT, using moral outrage to refine the definition and operationalization of the threat-level dimension posited in the original threat appraisal model (Jin & Cameron, 2007; Jin et al., 2012). With anger as the focal crisis emotion, Coombs and Tachkova (2022) examined the explanation of extreme threat level crises, grounded in moral outrage, and posited a series of effects of extreme threat on the threat appraisal process, further highlighting the importance of crisis READINESS at cognitive, affective, and conative levels, across individuals, teams, and organizations.

Grounded in crisis management and interdisciplinary literature and built upon the CCTT's public announcement of its 2024 READINESS theme (CCTT, 2023), we posit a new "READINESS" model (see Figure 2), which describes, explains, and predicts phenomena in issue, risk, conflict and crisis (including sticky crisis) arenas. READINESS is a multidimensional construct, embedded in a dynamic process and affected by a wide range of factors.

### 2.1 | READINESS as a dynamic process

As a dynamic process, READINESS means an organization is ready for risk, crisis, and sticky crisis (including crisis spillover).

#### 2.1.1 | READINESS for risk

Risk is a foundational element in crisis management. Any risk management program begins by analyzing the risks an organization faces. From these risks, managers anticipate the types of crises an organization will face and the warning signs associated with each crisis type (Coombs, 2023). The risks that can evoke crises have been evolving and expanding over the years. Initially, the focus was on operational risks that could be quantified easily such as the risk of an

accident. The inclusion of issues such as concern with government regulation and reputational risks driven by the digital environment has complicated risk assessments. Reputation risks, for example, are more symbolic than substantive. Reputational risks primarily are driven by the consequences of social evaluations by constituents often driven by the negative social media and traditional media coverage of an organization. These symbolic risks are difficult to quantify. For instance, it is difficult to precisely determine if a government will take a regulatory action, the nature of that action, and the action's effect on an organization. Figure 3 is an illustration of the variation in crisis risk quantification. The difficulty in quantifying many risks has implications for READINESS. It becomes challenging to be ready to handle the hard-to-quantify risks. This lack of READINESS is reflected in how managers respond to questions about being ready to handle various types of crises. The data tends to show confidence in being ready to handle the traditional operational crises rather than the crises associated with more esoteric risks such as reputation (Tuttle, 2016). Any assessment of READINESS must find a way to capture how READINESS can vary by the risk (crisis type) an organization is likely to encounter. We would anticipate that those risks that are easy to quantify would generate stronger READINESS scores than those risks that are challenging to quantify.

### 2.1.2 | READINESS for crisis and crisis spillover

In an age of social media increasing the speed by which a crisis can spread from one organization to another, corporate crisis spillover has become an emerging research topic in the field of crisis communication. When a crisis spillover occurs, a company can be linked to a crisis that is affecting another organization such as a competitor, and the negative consequences of crisis spillover can be significant when stakeholders make assumptions of guilt by association (Laufer & Wang, 2018). The Volkswagen emissions crisis spreading to other car manufacturers is one example of many high-profile crises that have spread from one organization to another (Veil & Dillingham, 2020).

Feldman and Lynch (1988) introduced the accessibility-diagnostics framework to evaluate the risk of crisis spillover. According to it, to trigger the spillover effect, two conditions need to be satisfied: accessibility and diagnostics. Accessibility entails the perceived similarity of the focal company and the company involved in the crisis. When the focal company is perceived to be in the same category as the company experiencing the crisis, it is likely to be

affected by crisis spillover (Janakiraman et al., 2009; Laufer & Wang, 2018). Diagnostics refers to when a category is associated with the crisis. If the likelihood that the crisis information is perceived as being related to a category in general is high, stakeholders will tend to believe that the crisis will impact the category as a whole (Laufer & Wang, 2018; Roehm & Tybout, 2006). Following the accessibility-diagnostics framework, a company will be at risk for crisis spillover if it shares a common category with the company experiencing a crisis, and an attribute of the category is perceived by stakeholders as associated with the crisis. If only one of the two conditions is met, a crisis spillover is unlikely to occur (Laufer & Wang, 2018).

Laufer and Wang (2018) identified four risk factors that can increase the likelihood of crisis spillover—country of origin (COO), industry, organizational type, and positioning strategy. Informed by the accessibility-diagnostics framework, these factors represent the perceived similarity of companies and the extent to which characteristics perceived to be common to the shared category can be linked to a crisis. Sometimes, companies can be associated with multiple risk factors, resulting in a coexistence of the risk factors. This will lead to a higher level of accessibility and diagnostics and, therefore, a higher risk of crisis spillover (Laufer & Wang, 2018).

Understanding the mechanism underlying the process of crisis spillover allows scholars and practitioners to assess the likelihood of crisis spillover occurring and develop productive response strategies to mitigate the risk of spillover effects. It also has important implications for crisis READINESS in the sense that organizations need to evaluate when it is appropriate to respond to a crisis occurring in another organization and how. According to Laufer and Wang (2018), this will depend on the likelihood that a crisis spillover may occur. When a competing company exhibits any of the crisis spillover risk factors mentioned above that are reflected in news media or the public arena, it will be vital for the company to understand whether speculation about possible crisis spillover effects is occurring. If this is indeed the case, the company will need to take actions such as issuing a denial and specifying why the crisis is not related to the company. Taking timely action in this situation can help the company combat uncertainty and the risk of crisis spillover.

In a broader sense, crisis READINESS can be regarded as a function of the risks being faced by an organization, and crisis spillover effects reflect one category of crisis risk as part of the model. There are certainly other risk factors relating to the category of crisis spillover effects that are worth considering. The four risk factors discussed in Laufer and Wang (2018) are thus an expression of potential problems and perceptions of harm for another



FIGURE 3 Crisis risk array.

organization created by events in an external organization that can affect the focal organization's overall crisis READINESS.

## 2.2 | READINESS manifested as multilevel efficacy

Readiness has connections to Bandura's (1997, 2006) concept of efficacy, a belief in one's ability to complete a task or reach a goal. Both are mental states that reflect an ability of people that their actions will produce a desired outcome (Bandura, 2012; Rousaki & Alcott, 2006). For crisis READINESS, the outcome people create in an effective response to the situation. Moreover, both efficacy and READINESS are multi-level concepts. Efficacy includes both self-efficacy and collective efficacy while READINESS applies to the individual, the crisis team, and the organization. It is important to explicate the multi-level nature of the two concepts.

Bandura (1997) differentiated between self-efficacy and collective efficacy. Self-efficacy is an individual-level belief in one's ability to complete tasks, your evaluation of your performance capabilities. Self-efficacy is important in organizations because employees must believe that exerting effort on the job does matter. But employees must also believe in the power of collective efficacy, "the shared belief among members of a group that their group or organization has what it takes to cope effectively and efficiently with the demands, challenges, stressors, and opportunities they face" (Bohn, 2010, p. 228). As Bandura (1997) noted, "People's shared beliefs in their collective power to produce desired outcomes is a crucial ingredient of collective agency" (p. 65). People must believe that working together will produce the desired results, not just that they can accomplish their own tasks. Moreover, Bandura (1997) argued that collective efficacy is "not simply the sum of efficacy beliefs of individual team members. It is an emergent group-level attribute" (p. 65). Collective efficacy is distinct as a construct from self-efficacy.

Collective efficacy is a broad concept that encompasses both team and organizational efficacy. Team efficacy is "a team's self-confidence (or beliefs) in its capabilities to successfully accomplish specific team tasks" (Lin et al., 2012, p. 169). The focus is on how the team feels about its ability to complete its tasks and to reach its goals. Bohn (2010) defined organizational efficacy as "a superordinate judgment of organizational performance capability that is induced by the assimilation and integration of multiple performance determinants including organizational collaboration, organization mission and focus, and organizational resilience" (p. 247). Bohn's definition reflects the three factors that comprise the assessment of organizational efficacy: (1) collaboration, a collective sense that working together the organization can accomplish goals, (2) mission and future, the organization knows where it is going, and (3) resilience, the ability to overcome obstacles. Though distinct, there is a relationship between self-efficacy and collective efficacy. Self-efficacy is the base for collective efficacy (Lin et al., 2012).

Crisis READINESS must be multi-level because each of the three levels noted earlier has implications for crisis management. Individual crisis READINESS provides the foundation and is how ready an

individual in the organization, especially crisis team members, feels to manage a crisis. Individuals must believe their actions will result in a positive outcome or they will not put forth the effort required to manage a crisis. Individual READINESS, similar to self-efficacy, is what allows people to persevere rather than to give up when faced with obstacles and crises will present many obstacles. Crisis team crisis READINESS is the belief in the collective sense of the team's ability to manage a crisis. Similar to collective efficacy, team crisis READINESS is not simply a sum of the team members' individual crisis READINESS but a team-level attribute. The focus is on the ability of the team to complete the requisite crisis management tasks.

Finally, organizational crisis READINESS reflects perceptions of the organization's ability to cope with the uncertainties created by a crisis (Parnell & Crandall, 2021). The current use of the term crisis READINESS in research work is assessed at the organizational level. A primary component of current crisis READINESS assessment is the organization's internal functionality factor which is comprised primarily of an assessment of the organization's commitment to crisis management including access to needed resources and adequate preparation (Parnell & Crandall, 2021; Rousaki & Alcott, 2006). Unfortunately, the current crisis READINESS measure also includes perceived likelihood of a crisis as a factor but that is more of an antecedent than a crisis READINESS factor. The current READINESS measure suggests organizational READINESS is a reflection not only of abilities to complete tasks but an organization's commitment to crisis management including resources.

We would argue that each level of crisis READINESS builds upon the other. Again, efficacy provides the motivation to persevere in the face of obstacles. Individual crisis READINESS is the foundation. People must believe they can successfully complete their part in the crisis management effort if they are to contribute to the crisis team. Moreover, people must believe the team can accomplish the crisis management goals if they are to contribute to the team. Finally, the organization must be viewed as able to engage in crisis management if people are to contribute to the organization's effort. Simply put, why would individuals put forth a crisis management effort if they felt they could not accomplish the tasks, the crisis team lacked the ability to manage a crisis effectively, or the organization hindered crisis management effort?

In sum, efficacy is well established as a contributor to motivation in action, including those by organizational actors. Crisis READINESS is at least in part a form of efficacy because it is concerned with an individual's motivation and effort for crisis management. Furthermore, crisis READINESS is multi-level as is efficacy. There is utility in considering the individual-level, crisis team-level, and organizational-level crisis READINESS. Each is a unique form of crisis READINESS that has implications for the enactment of crisis management efforts.

## 2.3 | READINESS as a mindset

READINESS also means having the right mindset, demonstrating crisis leadership with high emotional leadership as seen in the optimal mentality and willingness to adapt.

### 2.3.1 | Emotional leadership

As Coombs (2015) emphasized, crisis leadership has a major impact on crisis management effectiveness, the attributes of which include: willingness to learn, openness to new ideas, believing that the organization will emerge stronger after the crisis, awareness of being watched by stakeholders, and resistance against the temptation, under pressure, to utilize shortcuts that will make the crisis disappear but could be ineffective in the long run. All of these crisis leadership attributes are essential for building and strengthening the READINESS mindset.

Crisis leadership typically falls into the category of internal factors according to the contingency theory (see Cancel et al., 1999). In studying effective public relations leadership via a survey among U.S. practitioners, Jin (2010b) found that emotional leadership is critical in managing complex and challenging public relations situations. Among the core emotional traits and skills examined, transformational leadership was preferred by public relations leaders, in which empathy played an essential role. Transformational leadership and empathy were found to be significant predictors of public relations leaders' competency in (1) gaining employees' trust, (2) managing employees' frustration and optimism, and (3) taking stances toward employees and top management in decision-making conflicts. Given the essential role emotional leadership plays, we argue that organizational leaders' READINESS would include their emotional skills and how they communicate with their employees and top management in decision-making conflicts and crisis situations. Furthermore, in a review of crisis leadership literature, Wu et al. (2021) stated: "one important role of leaders is to reduce the likelihood of crisis occurrence and enhance the preparedness of their organizations and organizational stakeholders for crisis events." It is further posited that crisis leadership is a process where leaders prepare for, deal with, and recover from crises (Wu et al., 2021).

### 2.3.2 | Mental adaptability

When an organization has the necessary resources to fully confront a crisis (meaning they are prepared), we argue that the individuals within that organization will be more likely to (1) believe they can effectively accomplish the crisis tasks required of them (*self-efficacy*), (2) *trust* the organization's approach for managing the crisis, (3) be *confident* in the ability of the organization and its teams to manage the crisis, and (4) be *optimistic* for the overall outcome. Self-efficacy, organizational trust, confidence, and optimism, are all factors that can contribute to individuals' "psychological resilience," which in turn affects mental adaptability (Nindl et al., 2018). Psychological resilience as defined by Nindl et al. (2018) is "the role of mental processes and behavior in protecting an individual from the potential negative effect of stressors" (p. 1118). If an individual is protected from the negative effects of stress through their psychological resilience, then they are better equipped to mentally adapt to situations. If a crisis leader does not exhibit psychological resilience to

stress in a crisis, then they will be more likely to struggle in mentally adapting, which will negatively impact their decisions. Therefore, a major dimension of READINESS as a mindset is mental adaptability, which refers to the individual's ability and willingness to cognitively and affectively adapt to an ongoing situation.

Cognitive adaptability as defined by Haynie et al. (2012) is "the ability to effectively and appropriately evolve or adapt decision policies (i.e., to learn) given feedback (inputs) from the environmental context in which cognitive processing is embedded" (p. 238). Because crisis situations are constantly evolving, this definition derived from entrepreneurial research is applicable to crisis management. Organizational leaders must derive insights from the context of the crisis at every decision point, and inaction is still a decision being made in crisis contexts. If organizational leaders are not allocating their attention to feedback from the context of the crisis, then they will not be able to cognitively adapt. Similarly, if organizational leaders are allocating their attention to feedback from the crisis situation but choose to ignore that feedback when making decisions, then there is not a willingness to cognitively adapt. There are a variety of reasons a leader may not be willing to cognitively adapt even when cognitively adapting is the optimal decision, such as predisposing and situational factors that we mentioned in the discussion of contingency theory (Cancel et al., 1999). The ability and willingness of individuals within an organization to cognitively adapt impacts READINESS, and cognitive adaptability is just one dimension of mental adaptability.

Affective adaptability is defined by psychologists as the weakening of affective responses after one or more exposures to an event (Wilson & Gilbert, 2008). This definition suggests that crisis leaders with more experience in crisis situations will have a greater propensity for affective adaptation, but of course, affective adaptability is more nuanced and this is only one factor to consider. Affective adaptation also "involves higher order mental processes that alter the meaning of those events" (Wilson & Gilbert, 2008, p. 370), which suggests that affective and cognitive adaptation are linked and often co-occur. Affective adaptation is also tied to the human's physiological processes with physiological arousal accompanying intense emotions (Wilson & Gilbert, 2008). Homeostatic processes will oftentimes intervene in a situation where an individual is experiencing high arousal, and there will be a physiological process in response to help the individual calm down (Wilson & Gilbert, 2008). These factors demonstrate that affective adaptability encompasses both automatic and conscious processes. In Wilson and Gilbert's (2008) AREA (attend, react, explain, and adapt) model, they argue that "The more easily one can explain and understand an event, the more quickly one will adapt to it" (p. 379). Although specific crisis situations often cannot be predicted, if organizations train their members in simulated crisis events or past crises, then those members may be able to explain and understand future crises more readily through both affective and cognitive adaptation. This is a practical example of how preparedness (in this case, crisis training) can translate to mental adaptability and optimize READINESS.



## 2.4 | Key factors of READINESS: Mediatization, polarization, and (Dis)trust

Another key element to crisis READINESS is the dynamic information environment that organizations have to navigate. Over the past decades, through processes of mediatization (Strömbäck, 2008), organizations have become inherently intertwined with their media surroundings. In the context of organizations, mediatization highlights how media have become deeply integrated and institutionalized within organizations and their practices (Ihlen & Pallas, 2014). This phenomenon is primarily visible in organizations' increased visibility or newsworthiness as well as organizations increasingly being scrutinized by a larger and more diverse public.

Being on the media agenda and in the public eye has resulted in organizations' heightened focus on maintaining and renewing a silence to operate. Through this form of soft regulation (Mercer-Mapstone et al., 2017), organizations are enforced to meet and engage with the beliefs and expectations of relevant stakeholders and avoid activities that are deemed unacceptable in the eyes of societies (Gunningham et al., 2004). In other words, with their increased visibility and need to maintain a silence to operate, it has become near impossible for organizations to escape their societal role. As a result, organizations increasingly engage with sociopolitical issues beyond their core businesses but relevant to their publics. The so-called politicization of corporations and their environment implicitly forces them to enter sociopolitical debates (van der Meer & Jonkman, 2021). The shift towards organizations' communication and sociopolitical issues becoming more intertwined, comes with certain challenges related to organizations' crisis READINESS. Organizations' absence in debates about pressing issues or their general lack of engagement with society, might result in activists, journalists, or public groups to come knocking on the organization's door for justification on why they do not speak out on certain issues. Not only are organizations increasingly forced to speak out (van der Meer & Jonkman, 2021), but their silence might also be loudly heard and not without consequences.

Two other societal phenomena make organizations' involvement in sociopolitical issues more prone to cause a crisis situation. First, in the context of a polarized society, engagement with political issues becomes more challenging. Political polarization and fragmentation are considered a growing concern (Van Aelst et al., 2017). For example, with Republicans being more likely to voice conservative views on salient issues and Democrats being more likely to take a liberal stance (e.g., Layman & Carsey, 2002; Stoker & Jennings, 2008), numerous stakeholders might not see eye-to-eye on large societal issues that fuel public debate. The countless sociopolitical issues where public opinion is polarized—e.g., gun control, immigration, abortion, war support, climate change, vaccinations—evoke fierce emotional disputes, creating divides among stakeholders. Navigating their politically charged surroundings, and consequently engaging with issues that polarize stakeholders, provides large communicative challenges. Organizational crises are around the corner as organizations risk alienating specific stakeholders that hold different views

than the ones voiced by the organization when speaking out on contested issues (Nalick et al., 2016; Rim et al., 2020; van der Meer & Jonkman, 2021).

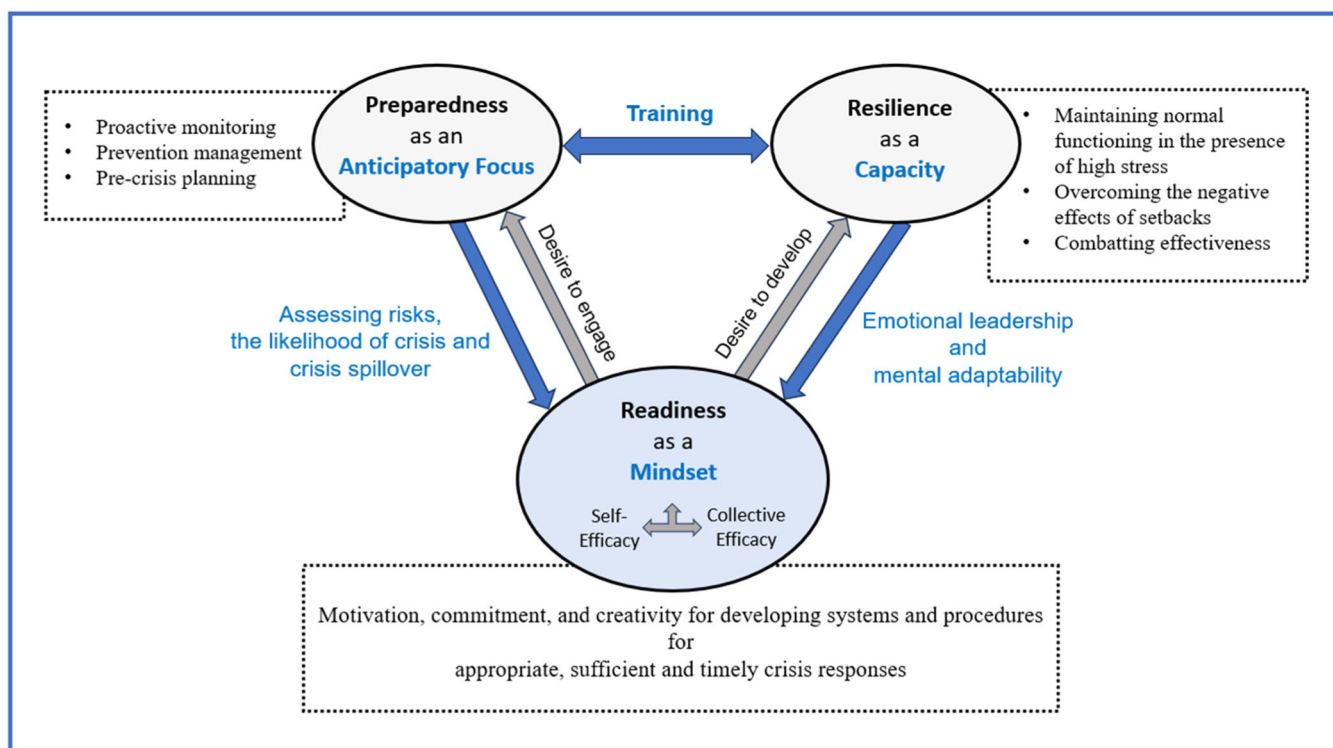
Second, the alleged societal “crisis of trust” further complicates organizations' communication and engagement with society. A series of politicized crises and major institutions not living up to societal expectations has resulted in a drop in general trust amongst citizens (Flew, 2019). With both institutional distrust and low trust in information ecosystems, an additional layer is added to organizations' communication with their surroundings (van der Meer et al., *in press*). Especially when organizations aim to engage with societal issues, they first have to overcome an initial step where distrust seems to be the default. Without being able to overcome this prerequisite of building trust before engaging in societal involvement, stakeholders might, for example, be skeptical of organizations' intentions, where organizations' engagement initiative might backfire into a legitimacy crisis.

The heightened level of threats that comes with organizations being pressured to engage with sociopolitical issues asks for careful navigation in terms of crisis READINESS. One approach for organizations would be strict issue monitoring. Here the concept of issue arenas can be valuable. Issue arena refers to the networks of interactions among multiple actors around certain sociopolitical issues (Luoma-aho & Vos, 2010). The issue-arena perspective holds that organizations are not the center of the network but, just like all other actors involved, a ‘stakeholder of the issue.’ The issue arena point of view allows organizations to understand their limited control in their dynamic communicative environment, where they are seen as one of the discursive players instead of being able to completely manage their surroundings. For crisis READINESS, it is thus important that organizations keep a constant eye on the issues central to the public and media debate. Organizations should aim to decipher what issues might be related to their practices and how they can best engage with sociopolitical issues while following their own moral compass. Engagement with polarized issues will cause backlash from those with different ideologies, when the organization is not ready to stand by its action or does not side with its main stakeholders, a spiraling crisis might be unable to prevent. Overcoming general levels of distrust needs to be taken into account to ensure that the organizations' communicated norms and intentions are understood in a rightful manner.

## 3 | APPLICATION AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS OF READINESS

### 3.1 | Application of the READINESS model

In August of 2019, the United States engaged in a large-scale crisis training exercise called Crimson Contagion designed to test “the Nation's ability to respond to a large-scale outbreak of a novel avian influenza virus (H7N9) strain, which quickly spreads via human-to-human transmission around the world and across the continental



**FIGURE 4** Relationship of preparedness, resilience, and READINESS.

United States with high rates of morbidity and mortality” (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services HHS, 2020, p. iii). Crimson Contagion was a 4-day exercise involving “19 Federal Departments/Agencies; 12 states; 74 local health departments and coalition regions; 15 tribal nations and pueblos; 87 hospitals; over 100 healthcare and public health private sector partners; and the White House National Security Council” (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services HHS, 2020, p. iii). It is striking how similar Crimson Contagion was to the COVID-19 pandemic that would occur in 2020.

The after-action report identified seven specific findings related to statutory authorities and policies, funding, planning, public information and risk communication, operational coordination, situational assessment, and resources. These findings highlighted weak spots in preparation that the nation needed to address. The points were not addressed, instead the White House chose to dismantle some existing preparedness programs such as the Global Health Security and Biodefense, the unit responsible for pandemic preparedness (Riechmann, 2020). The failed US response to COVID-19 was not a failure of crisis management principles, it was a failure of READINESS. An exercise designed to test preparedness found problems indicating the nation was not ready. READINESS is a mindset indicating a desire to engage with crisis preparation and execute a crisis response. US leaders decided to ignore the report, did not enhance preparation, and failed to be ready. The US leadership seemed to be disinterested in crisis management.

Preparation is a critical antecedent of READINESS. Consultants and academics have always been critical of organizations that simply create crisis plans and crisis teams but never train either. Training builds preparation by diagnosing weaknesses that need to be bolstered and building the skills necessary to manage crises. This is synonymous with military readiness frameworks, which emphasize the need for military forces to be organized, trained, and equipped to generate readiness (Herrera, 2020). Training helps to determine the effectiveness of the crisis plan and the ability of crisis team members, the diagnostic function. Crisis teams know the training exercise will not be the exact crisis they encounter but that they are learning to develop skills necessary for the improvisation required in an actual crisis (Coombs, 2023; Falkheimer & Heide, 2010). Preparation is critical to READINESS. Just as military READINESS marks the capacity to meet the demands of missions, crisis READINESS is marked by the mindset to meet the demands of crises (Herrera, 2020).

Figure 4 illustrates how the three key concepts discussed in the paper—preparedness, resilience, and READINESS—are related to each other. We see preparedness and resilience as two important and necessary factors to promote crisis READINESS. Corporate leaders and crisis teams need to embrace preparedness as an anticipatory focus and build their capacity of resilience, to have the READINESS mindset and combat against disorder of crises. Both factors can be cultivated through training. Thus, it is important for organizations to formulate comprehensive training programs and engage in such training frequently (Jin et al., 2017). However, as

mentioned earlier, organizations involved in costly training may produce a level of 'symbolic READINESS' that does not always reflect operational realities (McConnell & Drennan, 2006). Thus, strengthening the READINESS mindset also requires organizations to assess risks, the likelihood of crisis and crisis spillover on one hand, and develop emotional leadership and mental adaptability on the other hand. The former is built on organizational preparedness, and the latter on organizational resilience. Organizations with a strong READINESS mindset are motivated, committed, and have the creativity to develop systems and procedures for appropriate, sufficient, and timely crisis responses. They not only exhibit a desire to engage in crisis preparation but also a desire to develop organizational resilience and, therefore, have the potential to enhance both factors.

### 3.2 | Future directions of READINESS research and practice

Despite the United States engaging with the Crimson Contagion crisis training ahead of the COVID-19 pandemic, leaders chose not to address weak spots in preparation, which led to a failed COVID-19 response from the U.S. government. This case study informs our model of READINESS and indicates why READINESS is important to distinguish from preparedness. Training and preparedness are not enough to optimally manage a crisis, but with READINESS, optimal solutions to crises can be employed. The future of research in this area is vast, in which individual, team, and organizational level factors can be examined. At the individual level, for example, researchers can investigate the breakdown of the process in which preparation leads to mental adaptability and translates to READINESS. Researchers can ask questions such as, do certain individual traits/attitudes/beliefs cause an individual to ignore crisis contexts (lack of mental adaptability) for suboptimal outcomes? Do certain predisposing and situational factors make it harder for certain individuals to be ready? Are certain trainings better at facilitating mental adaptability to crises than others? These are just a few questions that could be examined and will look slightly different in specific contexts.

At the team and organizational levels, research could examine how team leaders can inspire collective efficacy leading to optimal crisis management outcomes. Factors of emotional leadership and multilevel efficacy could be examined in multiple contexts. The new READINESS model could also be used to investigate READINESS in specific contexts. How can we know when our organizations are ready to manage a crisis spillover situation? How can we know when we are ready to deal with polarization within the workplace at all levels? How can we know if we are ready for risk? Once again these are just a few questions to consider.

Last, future READINESS research should examine how READINESS can be maintained. Our model proposes ideas for how to achieve READINESS, but maintaining that READINESS is just as important to effectively manage multiple crisis situations over time. Organizations have to be ready to deal with multiple potential crises,

not just one. Organizations also have to maintain READINESS while they are dealing with an ongoing crisis. The level of READINESS could easily decline due to various factors including but not limited to financial, political, or managerial reasons. Research in this area should investigate how READINESS can be maintained to achieve optimal outcomes with the lowest expenditure possible over time.

To conclude, this concept paper puts forward READINESS as a keystone concept, connected with organizational crisis preparedness and resilience yet also going beyond via the focus on multilevel efficacy and mindset in a dynamic process of managing complex challenges, from threats, risks, conflicts, to crises and even sticky crises. It sets new research and training agendas for scholars and practitioners alike. There are many industry expert panels and workshops on building organizational preparedness and resilience, which continue to be essential; yet we argue that READINESS is a game-changing concept, which anchors organizational decision-making and well-being management with deeper, stronger, and more agile anchor, allowing organizational leaders, at multiple levels, to make optimal decisions and benchmark organizational performance with motivation, commitment, and creativity.

#### DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

There is no data associated with this conceptual paper.

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