Exploring the Effectiveness of Online Role Play Simulations in Tackling Groupthink in Crisis Management Training

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ABSTRACT

Crisis management in law enforcement contexts is considered to be a kind of Naturalistic Decision-making (NDM). In a NDM situation, crisis management personnel usually have to tackle highly fluid situations under great stress and uncertainty. It has been observed that a major challenge to the effective handling of crisis situations is the tendency for the personnel involved to ignore alternatives and make irrational decisions that, a phenomenon that the psychologist Janis (1972) refers to as Groupthink. This paper reports on the design of an online Role Play Simulation (RPS) for crisis management training and its implementation in in-service police training. The interactions of participants recorded during the RPS training were categorized using Bales’ Interaction Process Analysis (IPA). The results show that participation in the RPS has positive effect on the reduction of Groupthink tendency.

KEYWORDS

Computer Supported Collaborative Learning (CSCL), Crisis Management Training, Groupthink, Interaction Process Analysis (IPA), Online Role Play Simulation

INTRODUCTION

In general, a crisis is a major event, which can bring damaging effects to individuals, groups, organisations and even society. Crisis management is a process for an organisation to deal with such critical events. However, there is no official or agreed definition for crisis among researchers. According to Oxford English Dictionary, crisis is a state of change, uncertainty, which can either become better or worse. Hermann (1963) states that there are three conditions for the occurrence of crisis: there exists a severe danger to the organisation’s survival, there is a very short period of time to act, and the situation will become worse if the further development of the situation is not correctly anticipated. A fundamental characteristic of crisis is its ill-structuredness. Billings, Milburn and Schaalman (1980) also point out that crisis can be disruptive and no one can be fully prepared for a crisis because of its unpredictability.

Coombs (2007) summarises four key characteristics of crisis from previous research. First, crises are low-probability events and are thus hard for crisis management personnel to even have the motivation to plan for them. Therefore, management will normally start planning only when the...
organisation has been hit by a severe crisis. Second, crises can induce severe damage or loss. The extent of the damage may go far beyond an organisation or even a country, such as in the case of natural disasters like earthquakes and tsunamis. Third, the cause-effect relationships of crises are generally not easily identifiable. Because of this ambiguity, it is not easy to pinpoint even if the cause of the crisis is due to negligence. Fourth, crisis management requires quick and effective decision-making. If the organisation cannot respond with a quick and effective decision-making process, the crisis may rapidly intensify, resulting in significant damages and loss.

Crisis management poses great challenge to law enforcement agencies. Due to the inherent uncertainty of crises, both problems and consequences are not well understood, at least at the time of their occurrence. If law enforcement personnel are not well prepared both mentally and organisationally, the consequences could be chaos management rather than crisis management (Boin, ’t Hart, Stern & Sundelius, 2005). Since each crisis has its own specific context and conditions, there is no single or predefined solution even for the same kind of problem. Therefore, decision-makers have to be mentally prepared through previous experience or training. Under such circumstances, previous crisis experience can offer lessons for learning, but not as solutions to be modelled (Flin, 1996). In other words, crisis personnel should learn something from previous crisis experience, but observations alone have little value in handling crisis. There is a difference between procedural operations in crisis management training and strategic level decision-making during crisis. For example, it is essential for a fire fighter to practise and learn how to extinguish a fire through step-by-step instructions; and usually these instructions are well-defined and relatively routine. This kind of skills can be acquired through practicing the procedures. On the other hand, crisis management at a more strategic level cannot simply follow a routine process or a predefined schema, such as in following the crisis management process adopted during the fatal fire at the London King’s Cross underground railway station in 1987. That operation involved multiple government units such as police, fire and paramedic personnel, and the aspects to be handled in the crisis was complex and dynamic (Boin, ’t Hart, Stern & Sundelius, 2005). This kind of crisis requires strategic level management for effective handling.

Due to the complexity and time constraints involved, as well as the non-routine nature of the problems, strategic level crisis management requires thinking out of the box and flexible decision-making (Borodzicz, 2005). Unlike procedural instructions, strategic level crisis management training should help learners to understand that there is more than one solution to resolving a crisis, and to encourage creative thinking in the decision-making process. The objective of crisis management training is to develop learners’ ability to solve problems that require different adaptations to rapidly changing situations. Training in crisis management decision-making is essential for personnel in law enforcement agencies such as police forces, who often have to cope with managing major incidents.

Sniezek, Wilkins and Wadlington (2001) summarise the following challenges in crisis management training. First, crises do not occur frequently or regularly such that learning from direct experience in a specific crisis situation is not possible. Second, it is impossible for learners to test causal relationships in crisis processes, as these are non-deterministic and complex. Third, the conditions in real crises are not favourable for training or observation. Fourth, as each crisis has its own unique features, the skills of crisis management cannot be generalised to all kinds of crises. Fifth, there is a need for crisis management personnel to continuously update their knowledge and skills continuously due to the dynamic nature of crisis environments, changes in regulations and technologies for managing crises.

GROUPTHINK

Groupthink is a term coined by Janis in 1972 from his book Victims of Groupthink. Groupthink is what happens when a group fails to make effective decisions due to group pressures that lead to a deterioration of “mental efficiency, reality testing, and moral judgment” (p. 9). Under the influence of groupthink, constructive ideas and alternatives offered by one group may be ignored by members of another group, and irrational actions may be taken because of stereotypic perceptions of each
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