Dean’s Writing Prizes

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3-Stage Approaches: Hurricane Katrina & New Orleans, Pre-Crisis Response Analyzed

It was more than five years ago, when Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans, Louisiana. Considered to be one of the most destructive events that have occurred in the United States history, New Orleans is a prime example of crisis management failure. In crisis communication, preparation of prevention is extremely critical for the outcome of a crisis, and sets the tone as to how the crisis will be handled. According to W. Timothy Coombs, crises have a life cycle, viewed as a constant “ongoing process. Every day, organization[s]… can be scanning for potential crisis, taking actions to prevent them, or…be doing something to improve crisis prevention and response…” (2007) The three-stage approach, one of the many crisis management process models, provides three stages of approach to a crisis- “precrisis, crisis, and post-crisis.” (Coombs, 2007) Understanding stage one, precrisis, and the analytical examination the government’s role of crisis prevention management during Hurricane Katrina, the tremendous suffering of New Orleans, from post natural disaster, could have been minimized. Examining the government’s crisis management plan and preparation, lessons of prevention can be learned.

The three-stage approach is often utilized because of the general characteristic. It is able to accommodate two more specific approaches, such as Mitroff and Fink's model. (Coombs, 2007). The three-stage approach leaves room for flexibility of ideas by the crisis management team. (Coombs 2007). The three-stage approach is separated into three stages- 1. Precrisis, before the crisis event; 2. Crisis, the actual disaster occurrence; and 3. Postcrisis, crisis is over and an evaluation is conducted to prevent future repetition. (Coombs, 2007) With a focus on precrisis, this category divided into three substages. (Coombs, 2007) The first substage is signal
detection, gathering information and detecting warning signals. (Coombs, 2007) The second is prevention, responding to warning signals in a prompt manner to prevent a crisis from happening. Lastly, crisis preparation, being ready for a "crisis happening." (Coombs 2007) Having knowledge of the precrisis substages as well as a brief history of New Orleans, we can fully understand why the lack of preparation amongst the government runs deeply than just a natural disaster. Social injustice, political, and economical factors are all issues that were exposed from Hurricane Katrina. As a result, many consequences aroused from Hurricane Katrina.

Prior to Hurricane Katrina, New Orleans residents suffered economical problems, social injustice and racial tensions. This mainly affected African Americans. Louisiana was ranked the sixth poorest state in the United States of America in the year 2000, 28 percent being under the poverty line. (Bates, & Swan, 2007) A large percent of this statistic is made up of primarily African Americans. Segregation of white and black neighborhoods was visible, as well as income. Blacks resided in the poorest neighborhoods with awful housing conditions. (Bates, & Swan, 2007). Many poor African Americans did not own a vehicle, lacking in transportation, resulting in the inability to escape the natural disaster in a timely manner. (Bates, & Swan, 2007) Environmental health issues in New Orleans received lack of attention prior to the disaster, such as issues with resident's respiratory systems from lead poising. (Bates, & Swan, 2007) All of the above shows the government's lack of activeness and neglect. Hurricane Katrina internally magnified the complexity of these issues, and did not essentially alter them for the better. (Bates, & Swan, 2007)

The disaster itself- first advisory reports derived from The National Hurricane Center in Miami, Florida, warnings about a tropical storm formed over the Bahamas, soon known as
Hurricane Katrina. (Dryle, 2005) From August 24th to August 30th, 2005, Hurricane Katrina intensifies. Governor of Louisiana, Kathleen Blanco, declares state of emergency on August 26th. (Dryle, 2005) Two days later, on Sunday, New Orleans Mayor Ray Nagin issues an emergency evacuation order. Those who were not able to evacuate properly, moved to the Superdome for shelter. Later that same day, advisors warn that the levees might fail. (Dryle, 2005) The next day, August 29th, there are reports of overflowing water from the levees. Later, one of the main levees broke and floods the city of New Orleans. (Dryle, 2005) As Hurricane Katrina slowly dies down on August 30th, water continues to flood the city. August 31- Governor Kathleen Blanco orders all residents to leave New Orleans, but there is not enough provided transportation. Mayor of New Orleans sends a “desperate SOS” from the federal government- there is no power, no food, no water and no support for survivors, on September 1st. Finally, September 2nd, three days after Hurricane Katrina, help from government officials arrive. (Dryle, 2005)

Hurricane Katrina resulted in about 1,300 death tolls- one of the top three most deadly disasters (Security Management Group, International, 2006) According to Security Management Group, International, “civil unrest, violence, and the toxic environment effectively changed Hurricane Katrina from a natural disaster to a crisis.” (2006) Thousands were left six feet below sea level. Hurricane Katrina demolished more than 300,000 residential homes and disrupted power lines, which resulted in lack of communication. (Security Management Group, International, 2006) Outraged and the need of survival of residents increased in crime rates, officials doing very little to stop these crimes due to the overwhelming amount of crimes. (Security Management Group, International, 2006)

If the government efficiently followed stage one, precrisis, many disastrous outcomes could have been prevented. In the first substage of precrisis, signal detection, is the gathering and
detecting warning signals. In this case, there was lack of issue management amongst government officials. Government officials' neglected reported warnings, ignored complaints of social issues resulted in slow response to the crisis and failure of a prepared concrete crisis management plan putting New Orleans residents suffering the worse situation possible. The outcome of Hurricane Katrina deepened distrust within government officials. Many outraged New Orleans residents interpreted the lack of government response as the government simply "did not care." Ongoing social injustice issues and race segregation were not addressed and taken care of soon enough. The slowness of lack of transportation resulted in many deaths. Reputation management amongst government and primary stakeholders (residents) is deeply in distrust. The sluggish response left New Orleans residents to feel as if they were on their own. (Bates, & Swan, 2007)

Many scientists warned about foreseen disasters that may occur. (Shah, 2005) According to Radioworks in 2002, three years before Hurricane Katrina, Joseph Suhayda, former director of the Louisiana Water Resource Research Institute at Louisiana State University, warned about the current levee system. The levees were built for handling smaller storms below Category Three. (Zwerdling, 2002) Hurricane Katrina, reached Category Five, the levee was not strong enough to fight against it. Officials began to worry and complaints were made back in 2002, but no preventative actions were taken. (Koren, & Schulman)

The geographical location of New Orleans put residents at a disadvantage. Located between Lake Pontchatrain and Mississippi River, most of New Orleans is below sea level (O'Hanlon, 2002). If a flood were to occur, New Orleans would be underwater. The shape of New Orleans is like a bowl- the flooded waters would need to be manually pumped out (O'Hanlon, 2002).
As we move into the second substage, prevention, government officials, again, failed to take preventative actions to prevent any severe damages. Yes, a natural disaster is beyond our control, for we cannot control nature. But there are always methods to alleviate the severity of the situation. Many residents were left homeless, missing, and dead because of the poor support of the evacuation. There was not enough transportation provided. Approximately 50,000 residents needed to be evacuated, but only 10,000 were able to leave safely. (Koren, & Schulman) It took the government and FEMA two days after the hurricane to respond to the crisis. For this case, it took a crisis to occur in order for a response to happen. They were not ready for a crisis, such as Katrina. As Bush states, “I don't think anybody anticipated the breach of the levees.” (Koren, & Schulman)

The media was immediately involved and bought awareness to the situation. The government, having stakeholders learn about their lack of effectiveness and dawdling response, took action when the news gained massive media coverage. Finally, leading to the third substage, crisis preparation. Communication between government officials and stakeholders were silent. Although there were cries of help, state of emergencies declared, there were little assistance from the officials. Other stakeholders, such as the United States citizens and international stakeholders, learned about the crisis through the media. This brings negative attention upon government officials. For a country with such credibility, we were inefficient and seemed as weak by the way we handled the crisis.

In conclusion, many lessons can be learned from the Hurricane Katrina crisis. Precrisis, stage one of the three-staged approach, is essential in preparing for a crisis. Lack of preparation and planning may cause situations to become worse. Distrust and outrage increases amongst New Orleans citizens and the government. Government officials slow response to the crisis and
neglect of social problems portrayed our government in a negative image, amongst our citizens and internationally. Hopefully, in the future, we learn all learn from mistakes, and move forward by taking responsibility for actions.
Citations


