Managing conflict in the public sector during crises: the impact on crisis management team effectiveness

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Abstract: This study aims to investigate the relationships between emotional intelligence, communication, decision-making and conflict management styles in crisis management teams (CMTs), giving emphasis on leader-team member interaction during crisis situations. Participants were 177 individuals involved in CMTs representing Greek public organisations and government. Data were collected by means of structured questionnaires in a series of personal interviews. Results indicate that team members' ability to make decisions, internal communication and leaders' emotional intelligence are positively associated with cooperation and integration within CMTs in public sector. Implications for management are discussed including the need for leaders to further develop emotional intelligence competencies, so that team members are motivated to integrate activities and attain common goals increasing CMT effectiveness.

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1 Introduction

A crisis causes instability having an immediate impact on the structure and operation of a system. This affects individuals and groups, and marks a dysfunctional period in the smooth development (Almond et al., 1973; Linz and Stepan, 1978; Tilly and Stinchcombe, 1997; Boin et al., 2005). A system is in a state of crisis when those making the decisions believe their values are being seriously threatened, when they feel insecure and consider an immediate reaction mandatory to protect those values (Billings et al., 1980; Hermann, 1972; Mann and Janis, 1983; Tjosvold, 1984).

Crisis pertaining to the whole or part of a population is the consideration of public administration. Such are the crises when the governors face a serious threat to fundamental structures, values and norms of a system and when they, under the pressure of time and in uncertain conditions, need to take vital decisions (Perrow, 1984). Mayors and governors play a strategic role during and in the immediate aftermath of crises and disasters (Jong et al., 2016). A public organisation is in crisis when its institutional structure is seriously challenged (Boin and 'tHart, 2000) and the more lives are governed by the value(s) under threat, the deeper the crisis goes (Boin et al., 2005).

Crises happen randomly and in a non-linear fashion. Natural disasters, human conflicts, financial crisis, political uprisings, refugee crisis are common names used to describe a crisis that concerns public sector. In the 20th century these included wars,

genocides, hurricanes, revolts, conflicts combined with environmental, psychological, economic and political factors, health and security threats (Hillyard, 2000). Although the main distinction is between man-made and natural disasters (Rosenthal and Kouzmin, 1993; Boin et al., 2005) there is an extended bibliography on the typology of crisis (i.e., Egelhoff and Sen, 1992; Lerbinger, 1997; Marcus and Goodman, 1991; Pearson and Mitroff, 1993). A typology that focus on predictability and at the same time on the possibility to influence a crisis generates a four-area matrix in which several classes of crises and disasters can be distinguished as conventional crises, unexpected crises, intractable crises and fundamental crises (Gundel, 2005).

The systematic effort of the members of a system with the cooperation of stakeholders to prevent or manage a crisis (Pearson and Clair, 1998) is called crisis management and includes three basic phases. The pre-crisis phase which includes the signal detection of a forthcoming crisis, crisis preparation and crisis prevention. The crisis phase that begins with a trigger event and includes crisis recognition and crisis containment. The post crisis phase including recovery and learning (Mitroff et al., 1987, 1996; Coombs, 2007).

The management of a crisis is vital as it affects directly the long-term future of the social system (Rosenthal et al., 2001). The demands of public opinion are high and there is no room for failure (Drennan and McConnell, 2007). According to Boin et al. (2005) citizens whose lives are affected by critical contingencies expect governments and public agencies to do their utmost to keep them out of harm's way.

The responsibility for the management of a crisis lies heavily upon the crisis management team (CMT). CMTs are a crucial intersection of vast and complex inter-governmental and inter-organisational networks that are called to respond to a crisis (Boin et al., 2005; Wester, 2011). Effective crisis management in a global context not only saves lives and financial revenue, but also is consistent with growing demands from organisational stakeholders for responsible actions by crisis leaders. Leadership of governors during crisis is a young field of research (Jong et al., 2016).

In this study, we examine the impact of CMT leaders' emotional intelligence competencies on handling conflict by team members. Furthermore, this study investigates the relationship between the ability of the team member to make decisions in crucial conditions and the choice of integrating as a conflict management style with team leader. At the same time, we examine whether communication influences the team member in handling conflict within CMT.

2   Conflict and crisis management

Crisis management teams vary in their composition, size and other relevant elements Team members need to work as a group having an integrated behaviour to be able to capitalise the benefits stemming from the process (Daniels et al., 1997; Patton and Flin, 1999). Since crisis management is a collective decision-making process (Fink, 1986; O'Connor, 1985; Olaniran and Williams, 2001), human factors and team processes play a key role in improving the response speed, accuracy and efficiency of group members (Jehn and Techakesari, 2014).

Normally, according to Boin et al. (2005) the decision-making process takes place in some type of small-group, in cases though where political and bureaucratic leaders interact and reach some sort of collective decision that is taken 'unanimously or by

majority rule'. In reality, however, there are multiple considerations that may cause imbalance and conflict in a CMT. For example, it seems that under a lot of pressure people tend to focus on short-term results and ignore the long-term effect, following familiar patterns of behaviour and reducing their attention span (James and Wooten, 2010). In practice, this means that they deal with the basic problems in depth, while ignoring all secondary issues. Probably they also resort to stereotypes and fantasies becoming more agitated (Post, 1991; Flin, 1996) thus causing tension between the leader and his or her team members during the process of achieving important objectives.

Taking into consideration the special conditions that prevail throughout the entire duration of crisis management process, the members of the team who have the responsibility – especially concerning public administration – represent important institutions and organisations. We should also keep in mind that some people are by nature competitive. Tensions and stereotypes need to be appeased in order to have a positive result on teamwork (Polychroniou, 2008; Tekleab and Quigley, 2014). Conflict resolution should therefore be part of a collaborative process (O'Connor, 1985; Kreps, 1990). Furthermore, it should be clear who leads the team and who is merely advising. On that end, leadership has a direct influence on handling conflict, cooperation and teamwork (Flin, 2005; Saeed et al., 2014; Ayoko and Chua, 2014).

The notion of conflict is defined as a two-way communication process between social beings characterised by incompatibility, disagreement and distrust (Rahim, 2000). Conflict management within an organisation does not necessarily mean a strategy of averting, lessening or eliminating the conflict. On the contrary, it refers to the planning of effective strategies that primarily aim towards the elimination of the malfunctioning elements of the conflict and the concurrent enhancement of the functional elements (Ashkanasy et al., 2014).

Based on the studies of Blake and Mouton (1964) and Thomas (1976), Rahim (1983) considered conflict management styles on two dimensions, which represent motivational orientations of individuals in conflict situations: concern for self, and concern for others. The former dimension refers to the degree to which a person attempts to satisfy his or her own concerns in conflict resolution. The latter dimension refers to the degree to which a person desires to satisfy the concerns of others. The combination of these two dimensions leads to five types of conflict management: integrating, obliging, dominating, avoiding and compromising (Rahim, 1983; Rahim and Magner, 1995).

Integrating assumes a great interest in the objectives of the individual as well as the objectives of third parties. This particular style of conflict management is considered the most appropriate in the case of complex and crisis situations and issues that pertain to the strategic objectives and long-term planning. Integrating of the objectives, therefore, within the framework of the problem solving process helps towards their creative resolution (Rahim et al., 2000). Additionally, it falls within the process of using one's abilities, information and other resources to identify or re-define a problem and to develop alternative solutions (Tjosvlold et al., 2014).

This particular negotiating style entails the sincere devotion of the interested parties to manage the disagreement effectively through creative problem solving and cooperation (Rahim, 1985; Yong et al., 2014). Intragroup trust and value consensus between team members facilitates the integrated behaviour of the team (Camelo-Ordaz et al., 2014).

3 Hypotheses

Systemic efficiencies and effectiveness depend on leaders with considerable relational capital and the exercise transformational leadership. Such leadership will be crucial in the future evolution of effective emergency management systems (Caro, 2016). Transformational leadership is associated with greater levels of positive effect, which leads to higher resilience among team members in a crisis situation (Sommer et al., 2016). Combined with the features in crisis situation, leaders' emotional control and the quality of leader-member exchange are two important factors that play the moderating role in the relationship between leader and members (Zhang et al., 2012). The relationships between integrating and interpersonal dimensions of emotional intelligence are crucial for handling conflict and leading team (Rahim et al., 2002; Polychroniou, 2008; Follesdal, and Hagtvet, 2013). Empathy, social skills and motivation are interpersonal dimensions of emotional intelligence that if possessed by a leader can have a positive effect on his or her leadership (Goleman, 1995, 2001; Polychroniou, 2009; Antonakis et al., 2009; Cavazotte et al., 2012). Based on these contributions, we hypothesise:

H1: Leader's interpersonal emotional intelligence competencies are positively related to the adoption of integrating by a CMT member as the style to handle a conflict with team leader.

H1.1: Leader's empathy is positively related to the adoption of integrating by a CMT member as the style to handle a conflict with team leader.

H1.2: Leader's social skills are positively related to the adoption of integrating by a CMT member as the style to handle a conflict with team leader.

H1.3: Leader's motivation is positively related to the adoption of integrating by a CMT member as the style to handle a conflict with team leader.

From natural disasters and terrorist attacks to bribery and consumer activism, organisations face multiple business crises every year across diverse geographical locations and cultures (Maldonado and Vera, 2014). Crisis leaders have the charisma to lead with compassion team members through a sudden and largely unanticipated, intensely negative, and emotionally draining circumstance (DuBrin, 2013). Leadership in crises includes critical tasks: sense-making, decision-making, meaning-making, terminating and learning (Boin et al., 2005). Elements to be taken into account include the 'explosion' of data that bring about the need to communicate (Boin et al., 2006; Wester, 2011). The effectiveness of crisis management depends on making things happen and getting the job done (Boin et al., 2013). Analysing and synthesising data produces right decisions and integrative communication in crisis situations (Coombs, 2007; Palttala and Vos, 2012).

The application of integrating in handling disagreements is characterised by open communication and a constant flow of information, matched with the examination of disagreements among the two parts in order to find a mutually accepted solution (Hocker and Wilmot, 1998; Rahim, 2011). Two way flow of information, the study of alternative solutions, and constructive analysis of disagreements with the objective of identifying a solution that will bring about the greatest common benefit (Ashkanasy et al., 2014). Taking lead from these contributions, we hypothesise the following:

H2: Internal communication among the members of the CMT is positively related to the adoption of integrating by a CMT member as the style to handle a conflict with team leader.

H2.1: Internal formal communication among the members of the CMT is positively related to the adoption of integrating by a CMT member as the style to handle a conflict with team leader.

H2.2: Internal informal communication among the members of the CMT is positively related to the adoption of integrating by a CMT member as the style to handle a conflict with the team leader.

As it was stated, crisis management is primarily dependent on the ability of the individuals to make decisions. It is a dynamic process characterised by time pressure, risks and the continuous change of conditions (Coombs, 2007). A leader, therefore, should combine the ability to assess the information and make the right decisions with his or her team members taking into consideration the time limitations and difficult conditions (Quarantelli, 1988; Halverson et al., 2004; James and Wooten, 2010). Though different critical decisions are taken at operational or strategic levels (Boin et al., 2006; 2013; DuBrin, 2013), throughout the process decisions are made under pressure and in conditions of uncertainty (Janis and Mann, 1977; Janis, 1989). Leaders who seek team members' ideas about how to deal with the crisis, who empathise with the stresses and strains experienced by team members, and who encourage followers to ask for assistance when needed, may help team members constructively interpret current events and respond positively (Sommer et al., 2016). Based on the previous research the following hypothesis has been developed:

H3: The ability of CMT members to make decisions in crucial conditions is positively related to the adoption of integrating by a CMT member as the style to handle a conflict with team leader.

4 Methodology

4.1 Research objectives

This study aims to investigate the factors that affect the adoption of integrating as conflict management style by CMT members in Greek public organisations. Primarily, CMT leader's emotional intelligence and his or her ability to manage team members leads us to the need to study which competencies of leader's emotional intelligence influence the choice of integrating by a member of the CMT as the optimum style of conflict or disagreement management with the team leader. Moreover, we examine whether and to what extent the formal and informal internal communication and the ability of CMT members to make decisions influence the choice of conflict management style and integration within the framework of CMT operation.

4.2 Sample and procedure

The quantitative research was based on a sample of 177 individuals that were involved in crisis management within the framework of Greek public administration at least once.

Participants were involved as members, group leaders, executives or external advisors in crisis situations. Data were collected by means of questionnaires in a series of face-to-face anonymous structured interviews increasing reliability of data. The prescribed method of data collection is considered to be appropriate due to the status of the participants, sensitivity issues and the need for confidentiality.

In terms of gender, sample comprised 126 male (71.2%) and 51 female (28.8%). In terms of age 55 (33.1%) of the participants were 25–34 years old, 78 (44.1%) were 35–44 years old and 34 (19.2%) were 45–54 years old. The sample was well educated as 78 (44.1%) of the participants have completed postgraduate studies and 27 (15.3%) holds a PhD degree. Education background refers mainly to business administration/economics (29.4%) and 70.6% to other studies (e.g., political, social, engineering).

Of the participants 64.4% of the sample had been involved in a crisis management process more than twice. This highlights that the sample comprised experienced participants (top and middle managers) reflecting validation of survey. In addition, 15.3% of the sample was part of a CMT twice, while 20.3% once. Moreover, 82 individuals (46.3%) were working in ministries, 52 (29.4%) in public sector organisations and 15 (15.9%) in security/armed forces representing important organisations, institutions and agencies.

4.3   Measurement

Emotional intelligence. The selected components of leader's emotional intelligence (empathy, social skills, motivation) were measured with 19 items adopted from the EQ index (EQI) (Rahim et al., 2002, 2006; Polychroniou, 2009). The EQI measures subordinates' perceptions of their respective leaders' motivation, social skills and empathy. Sample items for social skills, motivation and empathy are: 'CMT leader confronts problems without demeaning those who work with him or her', (social skills), 'CMT leader stays focused on tasks at hand even under pressure' (motivation), 'CMT leader understands the links between employees' emotions and what they do' (empathy).

Communication. Internal communication was examined under the prism of the formal and informal communication (Polychroniou, 2005) among the members of the CMT within the organisation. Sample items include 'I feel comfortable to communicate with my peers when it is necessary', 'I follow formal communication channels'.

Decision-making. The ability of CMT members to make decisions in crucial conditions is measured by seven items based on Incident Management Team (Crichton et al., 2005). Sample items for the ability of CMT members to make decisions include: 'I identify risks and discuss alternative courses of action', 'I identify options and select course of action'.

Integrating. Integrating conflict management style was measured with seven items adopted from the Rahim Organisational Conflict Inventory-II (ROCI-II) (Rahim, 1983). These items measured how the members of the CMT handle conflicts with the group leader concerning integrating style. Sample items for integrating style are: 'I try to investigate an issue with CMT leader to find a solution acceptable to us', 'I try to integrate my ideas with those of CMT leader to come up with a decision jointly'.

4.4 Statistical analysis

Groups of variables have been examined on all aforementioned stages measured with the Likert scale (1: I completely disagree to 5: I completely agree). The analysis was based on methods widely used for researching similar aspects related to the subject. Specifically, the variables were grouped by applying factor analysis, after checking the adequacy of the sample using the Keiser–Meyer–Olkin index and verifying that according to the Bartlett's Test of Sphericity variables' correlations allow for the application of factor analysis. Thereafter, we implemented tests on the reliability of the factors using the coefficient Cronbach alpha. To test hypotheses, data analysis proceeded in two stages using S.P.S.S., factor analysis and multiple regression analysis.

5 Results

5.1 Emotional intelligence

Exploratory factor analysis (principal component analysis, loading > 0.40, eigenvalue > 1) on the 30 EQI items (KMO index: 0.909, Bartlett's Test of Sphericity: 0.000) supported interpersonal dimensions of emotional intelligence (social skills, motivation, empathy). Percentage of variance explained was 74.1% and the internal consistency reliability coefficients of the three subscales of the EQI, as assessed with Cronbach alpha, is >0.70.

5.2 Internal communication

Principal component analysis resulted in two factors and the variables (KMO index: 0.760, Bartlett's test of sphericity: 0.000) were reduced from eight to seven since the loading of one variable is <0.40. Two produced factors related to the formal and informal internal communication. Factors explain 62.1% of the entire variation. Reliability test using the Cronbach alpha coefficient confirms the reliability of the scale, as every factor is >0.70.

5.3 Decision-making

Principal component analysis for the seven variables (KMO index: 0.869, Bartlett's Test of Sphericity: 0.000) that relate to the ability of the team members to make decisions explains 60% of the entire variation. The reliability test that was applied using the Cronbach alpha coefficient confirms the reliability of the scale, as for the sole factor produced the price is >0.70.

5.4 Conflict management

Variables (KMO index: 0.801, Bartlett's Test of Sphericity: 0.000) that refer to the methods of conflict management among leader and CMT members were reduced from 28 to 25, since the loadings of three variables were <0.40. Exploratory factor analysis (principal component analysis, loading >0.40, eigenvalue >1) on the ROCI-II items supported dimension of integrating conflict management style. Percentage of variance

explained was 64% and the internal consistency reliability coefficients as assessed with Cronbach alpha is >0.70.

Requirements for the application of multiple regressions linear model were tested. Firstly, Durbin–Watson test was applied produced a value of 1.872 close to 2, proving there is no problem with the autocorrelation of residuals. There is also no constraint with multicollinearity since the Tolerance and VIF values are >0.20 and <10, respectively, for all variables. For testing linearity and homoscedasticity, we used the Scatterplot where the residuals are random and normally scattered that led to the conclusion that the requirements for linearity and homoscedasticity are met.

Multiple regression analysis was computed with integrating conflict management style as the dependent variable and the selected subscales of the EQI (empathy, social skills and motivation), internal communication (formal, informal) and decision-making as the independent variables. Tables 1 and 2 shows results for regression analyses.

Table 1   Values for *R* and *R* squared

Model	R	R square	Adjusted R square	Std. error of the estimate	R square change	F change	df1	df2	Sig. F change	Durbin-Watson
						Change statistics				
1	0.432(a)	0.186	0.182	0.41036	0.186	40.106	1	175	0.000	
2	0.517(b)	0.267	0.259	0.39053	0.081	19.217	1	174	0.000	
3	0.544(c)	0.296	0.284	0.38394	0.029	7.025	1	173	0.009	1.872

[a]*Predictors*: (Constant), decision making.

[b]*Predictors*: (Constant), decision making, internal formal communication.

[c]*Predictors*: (Constant), decision making, internal formal communication, EQ empathy.

[d]*Dependent variable:* CM integrating.

Table 2   Results from regression analysis

Model		B	Std. error	Beta	t	Sig.	Tolerance	VIF
		Unstandardised coefficients		*Standardised coefficients*			*Collinearity statistics*	
1	(Constant)	2.720	0.228		11.939	0.000		
	Decision making	0.335	0.053	0.432	6.333	0.000	1.000	1.000
2	(Constant)	2.431	0.227		10.729	0.000		
	Decision making	0.297	0.051	0.382	5.807	0.000	0.971	1.030
	Internal formal communication	0.148	0.034	0.289	4.384	0.000	0.971	1.030
3	(Constant)	2.174	0.243		8.944	0.000		
	Decision making	0.265	0.052	0.342	5.141	0.000	0.920	1.087
	Internal formal communication	0.127	0.034	0.247	3.715	0.000	0.918	1.090
	EQ empathy	0.116	0.044	0.180	2.650	0.009	0.880	1.137
				Coefficients(a)				

[a]Dependent variable: CM integrating.

The choice of integrating by a member of the CMT to handle a conflict with the team leader is due to: his or her ability to make decisions, internal formal communication and the leader's empathy. CMT member's ability to make decisions is positively associated with using integrating as a conflict management style that provided support to Hypothesis 3. It appears that decision-making in crisis situations is a good predictor of using integrating by team member as style in order to handle conflicts with leader ($\Delta R^2 = 0.186$, $p < 0.01$). Internal formal communication is also positively associated with the adoption of integrating handling conflict style that provided partial support to Hypothesis 2 ($\Delta R^2 = 0.081$, $p < 0.01$). To a lesser degree, CMT leader's empathy ($\Delta R^2 = 0.029$, $p < 0.01$) is also positively related with the choice of integrating by team members providing also partial support to Hypothesis 1.

6 Conclusions

Results of this study indicate that the choice of integrating as a conflict management style is positively related to the CMT member's ability to make decisions in crucial conditions. This is due to the fact that this method requires all parties, the leader and the member, to be dynamic; since part of the process includes the use of skills, information and other resources in order to identify and redefine a problem and to develop effective alternatives for its handling and resolution.

Furthermore, the choice by a CMT member of integrating – that implies a great interest both for the objectives of the individual and those of third parties – as a style to handle a conflict or a disagreement with the CMT leader at crisis phase, is influenced and shaped also from the way they communicate internally. To achieve this, all communication channels need to be clear. We come to the understanding that, since the use of integrating for managing disagreements requires the proper and continuous flow of information internal formal communication is very important. Formal procedures help and guarantee the quality of information in order to make the right decisions.

Finally, we realise the importance of the CMT leader's emotional intelligence such as is his or her ability to identify the feelings and needs of team members in order to regulate all pending matters to achieve the desirable objectives. The leaders that comprehend the importance of emotional intelligence are in a position to identify the needs of their subordinates, to actually express their interest, reflect the changes in their emotional state and work collectively. Specifically, empathy helps leaders to understand team members' feelings, take active interest in them and provide emotional support to their team members in order to work together to achieve the targets set.

Overall, CMT leaders' beliefs, values and interpersonal competences are of critical importance to the overall style of leadership that they adopt. It is therefore understood that the personality of the leader together with his or her behaviour are of greater importance than, for example, assessing information and making decisions in conditions of extraordinary stress.

Interpreting the results having in mind that integrating is generally considered as the optimum method in the case of conflicts on complex and crisis matters that pertain to major objectives and also long-term policy decisions, we may conclude that this particular conflict-handling style is suitable for crisis management, especially during a crisis in a dynamic, unpredictable environment.

As it was stated the study was conducted in Greece a country that displays substantial cultural differences which further promotes the significance of this topic. Individualistic culture as well as perceived degree of power distance in public organisations and institutions may have a strong impact on conflict, cooperation and integration within CMTs. Moreover, people's loyalty is at an all-time low in recession times and economic crisis terms. Overall, CMT leaders should further enhance emotional intelligence competencies in order to develop team members' engagement and increase CMT effectiveness promoting integration, accuracy and efficiency.

Another but related implication is that public sector organisations, institutions and agencies should provide positive reinforcements for learning and improving CMT leaders' essential and interpersonal emotional competencies needed for jobs with high degree of responsibility and accountability.

There should also be appropriate organisational changes that would require creating flatter, decentralised, and less complex structures in central and local government and public organisations. Organisational and digital transformation having as a starting point cultural change will encourage leaders in crisis situations to enable fast change, follow clear communication channels and make appropriate decisions with CMT members based on low conflict intensity, integration and coordination.

7   Limitations and direction for future research

Data were collected using snowball sampling that might limit generalisability of results. Larger and more representative samples are needed to further investigate the relationship between leaders' emotional intelligence, members' decision-making, communication and conflict management styles within CMT operation regarding specific crisis situations (e.g., terrorist attack, natural disaster, refugee crisis). Further and cross-cultural research is needed to enhance our understanding of the interrelationships between cooperative conflict management styles and organisational team factors during crisis management (e.g., political instability crisis, financial crisis) in public organisations and governments (central, local, agencies).

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