The Crisis Leadership Framework: A Meta-Theoretical Integration

Justin F. Willett[1] and J. Brian Houston[2]

[1]Novak Leadership Institute, University of Missouri

[2]Department of Communication, University of Missouri

Justin F. Willett, Ph.D.

Research Director, Novak Leadership Institute, University of Missouri

willettj@missouri.edu

https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9110-0837

Justin F. Willett's research focuses on leadership communication and employee outcomes, healthcare strategic communication, and narrative persuasion.

J. Brian Houston, Ph.D.

Professor, Department of Communication, University of Missouri

houstonjb@missouri.edu

https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3666-9729

J. Brian Houston's research focuses on communication at all phases of disasters and on the mental health effects and political consequences of community crises.

Reference

Willett, J. F., & Houston, J. B. (in press). The Crisis Leadership Framework: A meta-theoretical integration. In D. D. Sellnow, R. Freihaut, Y. Xu, & T. L. Sellnow (Eds.), *Encyclopedia of Crisis Management*. Edward Elgar Publishing.

Abstract

The Crisis Leadership Framework integrates fragmented crisis leadership research across communication, management, and psychology disciplines. This meta-theoretical model synthesizes three influential frameworks: Sellnow and Seeger's (2021) crisis communication typology, Bundy et al.'s (2017) temporal crisis management model, and Carton's (2022) dual-axis leadership framework. The integrated framework conceptualizes crisis leadership across four dimensions: leadership form (leader vs. leading), causal role (cause vs. consequence), crisis orientation (internal vs. external), and temporal phase (precrisis, crisis, postcrisis). This multidimensional approach enables systematic classification of existing research, reveals theoretical gaps, and provides a generative structure for future inquiry into how leadership functions during high-stakes crises.

Keywords: crisis, crisis communication, crisis leadership, crisis management, leadership, theory

The Crisis Leadership Framework: A Meta-Theoretical Integration

Crisis leadership research suffers from theoretical fragmentation across multiple disciplines including communication, management, psychology, and public relations. While each discipline offers valuable insights, the lack of integration limits understanding of how leadership functions during crises. This entry defines and explains the Crisis Leadership Framework, which synthesizes three influential meta theories: (1) Sellnow and Seeger's (2021) philosophical typology of crisis communication, (2) Bundy et al.'s (2017) temporal and contextual model of crisis management, and (3) Carton's (2022) dual-axis framework for leadership research.

Crisis leadership refers to the processes by which individuals and groups exert communicative and strategic influence to manage uncertainty, maintain legitimacy, and guide collective action in response to high-stakes events. As Riggio and Newstead (2023) explain: "Unforeseen, unknowable, and truly novel crises require a distinctive leadership response that often includes being flexible and adaptable, making good decisions quickly, and mustering resources on short notice" (p. 202). The Crisis Leadership Framework offers a layered understanding of crisis leadership by bridging philosophical assumptions, crisis phases, and conceptualizations of influence. This entry proceeds in three parts: (1) defining and explaining the integrated theoretical framework, (2) illustrating its application in existing research, and (3) outlining future directions and extensions.

Definition and Explanation of the Crisis Leadership Framework

1.1 What Is Crisis Leadership?

Crisis leadership is a socially embedded process of influence that unfolds under conditions of material threat, emotional volatility, and temporal urgency. Sellnow and Seeger (2021) frame crisis as communicatively constituted but materially consequential, while Bundy et

al. (2017) emphasize its processual nature across precrisis, crisis, and postcrisis stages. Carton (2022) distinguishes between the leader as a source of influence and leading as an adaptive behavior enacted in real time. Taken together, these perspectives support an integrated ontological view of crisis leadership as both structural and emergent, cognitively and emotionally charged, and shaped by both symbolic and material conditions. This complexity calls for corresponding pluralism in values, epistemologies, and methods, explored in the subsections that follow.

1.2 What Matters in Crisis Leadership?

Crisis leadership carries distinct normative expectations grounded in the values of each contributing discipline. Sellnow and Seeger (2021) view effective crisis communication as a moral obligation grounded in ethics of care and significant choice. Bundy et al. (2017) emphasize relational accountability, where leaders must balance competing stakeholder expectations while safeguarding the organization's legitimacy. Carton (2022) focuses less on normative commitments and more on how leaders mobilize efforts toward shared goals. Although these perspectives differ in their focus on what matters in crisis leadership, one consistent emphasis is the ethical use of influence under conditions of constraint and uncertainty.

The integrated view reconciles these perspectives by treating ethics, organizational priorities, and stakeholder relationships as mutually constitutive. Ethical action is not a separate dimension of leadership but is embedded in how communication strategies, decision-making processes, and influence attempts unfold. While some traditions emphasize disclosure and public good, others highlight organizational survival, recovery, and performance. This framework accommodates both, treating tension between organizational resilience and stakeholder well-being as a defining challenge for crisis leaders.

1.3 What Knowledge is Valid in Crisis Leadership?

Crisis leadership scholarship spans diverse epistemological traditions. Sellnow and Seeger (2021) trace the evolution of crisis communication from early functionalist models to more pluralistic perspectives that incorporate interpretive and critical approaches. Bundy et al. (2017), writing from a management perspective, emphasize post-positivist assumptions and causal modeling to explain how organizations respond to crisis triggers and stakeholder pressures. Carton (2022) positions leadership research squarely within a post-positivist epistemology, emphasizing construct clarity, causality, and systematic observation.

The integrated view accommodates this range by distinguishing between epistemic priorities—what kinds of knowledge are sought and how they are justified. Post-positivist studies prioritize explanation and prediction, often treating leadership as a measurable variable. Interpretive traditions focus on meaning-making, understanding how actors experience and construct leadership through communication. Critical approaches interrogate power and representation, especially in postcrisis narrative and legitimacy reconstruction. Recognizing this diversity enables the framework to support inquiry across paradigms while encouraging reflexivity about underlying assumptions.

1.4 How Do These Ideas Work Together?

The integrated Crisis Leadership Framework synthesizes foundational assumptions from Carton (2022), Bundy et al. (2017), and Sellnow and Seeger (2021) into a multidimensional space for conceptualizing and studying crisis leadership. It combines key axes from each model to organize research across four dimensions: (1) leadership form (Leader vs. Leading), (2) causal role (Cause vs. Consequence), (3) crisis orientation (Internal vs. External), and (4) temporal phase (Precrisis, Crisis, Postcrisis). See Figure 1.

This model does more than compile existing insights—it creates a generative space for theorizing. The dimensions intersect to clarify how leadership traits or behaviors, treated as either inputs or outcomes, function across internal and external contexts and throughout the crisis lifecycle. In doing so, the model accommodates diverse epistemologies and methods while enabling conceptual precision.

Examples of Application in Existing Research

This section illustrates how the Crisis Leadership Framework can be used to classify, interpret, and compare existing research across disciplines. Rather than providing a comprehensive review, it presents four representative configurations that demonstrate the model's conceptual range. Configurations, which reflect distinct intersections of the framework's dimensions, were selected based on empirical maturity and theoretical clarity. The emphasis on leading over leader reflects the field's behavioral orientation, and the predominance of causal configurations mirrors researchers' tendency to treat leadership as an independent variable. At the same time, the inclusion of one trait-based and one consequence-based configuration represents the framework's ontological and causal flexibility. The set also spans the full crisis lifecycle—precrisis, crisis, and postcrisis—highlighting the model's temporal dimension. Each configuration is illustrated with one example research study drawn from strategic communication, public relations, organizational psychology, and management.

Configuration 1: Leading – Cause – External – Crisis Phase

This configuration conceptualizes crisis leadership as a communicative process that causally shapes public perception and behavior during the acute phase of a crisis. Leadership is defined as leading—the strategic enactment of message behaviors that influence stakeholder sensemaking, trust, and compliance. This framing aligns with Carton's (2022) behavioral

dimension of leadership, Bundy et al.'s (2017) emphasis on stakeholder evaluation during crisis, and Sellnow and Seeger's (2021) view of public-facing communication as a site of ethical persuasion. Research in this space typically treats leadership as an independent variable, a deliberate input that produces outcomes such as public trust, reduced blame, or behavioral intention. For example, Naughton et al. (2024) apply Emotions as Social Information (EASI) and Interpersonal Emotion Regulation (IER) theories to test how communication from Irish and British government leaders influences public perceptions and intentions. Using multi-study evidence from Ireland and the U.K., they show that leaders' affect-improving IER—especially positive affective engagement—enhances perceived trustworthiness, which in turn boosts citizens' intentions to comply with public-health restrictions.

Configuration 2: Leading – Cause – Internal – Crisis Phase

This configuration conceptualizes crisis leadership as a behavioral process that shapes employee adaptation during acute organizational disruption. Leadership is defined as leading—the enactment of message behaviors that influence trust, motivation, engagement, and psychological well-being. It is treated as a causal force, aligned with Carton's (2022) emphasis on leadership-as-influence, Bundy et al.'s (2017) focus on internal coordination during crisis, and Sellnow and Seeger's (2021) normative commitment to transparent, supportive internal communication. Studies in this space examine how leadership messages function as deliberate interventions that enhance organizational stability and individual coping. For example, Sedefoglu et al. (2024) conducted a three-wave panel study of 729 German employees shortly after the first COVID-19 lockdown. Using the Job Demands–Resources (JD-R) framework, they found that supportive leadership behavior (operationalized as perceived consideration leadership) predicted

later employee work engagement in the second lag among employees working from home but not among those working on-site.

Configuration 3: Leader – Cause – Internal – Precrisis Phase

This configuration conceptualizes crisis leadership as a function of individual characteristics—traits, styles, or predispositions—that causally influence an organization's ability to prepare for crisis. Leadership is defined as a property of the leader, rather than an enacted process, and is treated as a cause of preparedness outcomes such as planning, sensemaking, and anticipatory coordination. This perspective aligns with Carton's (2022) treatment of trait-based leadership as a stable source of influence, Bundy et al.'s (2017) emphasis on precrisis capability development, and Sellnow and Seeger's (2021) framing of crisis readiness as an ethical imperative grounded in foresight and responsibility. For example, Jin et al. (2017) report a global survey of senior communication leaders in 23 countries. They show that distinct leadership qualities—especially knowledge management, strategic decision-making, team collaboration, self-dynamics, organizational support for two-way communication, ethical orientation, and relationship building—differentially predict precrisis strategy adoption, including plan development, scanning, training, stakeholder education, and issues-management programs.

Configuration 4: Leading – Consequence – Internal – Postcrisis Phase

This configuration conceptualizes leadership as a postcrisis outcome—an emergent behavioral process that develops through reflection, recovery, and organizational learning. Leadership is defined as leading but framed as a consequence rather than a cause: a set of practices that arise from crisis experience rather than precede or produce it. This view aligns with Carton's (2022) framing of leadership as a dependent variable, Bundy et al.'s (2017) attention to

renewal and resilience in the postcrisis phase, and Sellnow and Seeger's (2021) emphasis on ethical learning and system adaptation. For example, Högberg (2022) examines resilience-in-practice through a qualitative, longitudinal study of hotel managers in Denmark, Sweden, and Norway during COVID-19. Using a leadership-as-practice lens and resilience scholarship, the study identifies three themes—responding to crisis, persistent adaptation, and learning during and from the crisis—showing how managers balanced emotional and rational demands while adjusting roles and routines. Thirty-five interviews with 10 managers and approximately 70 hours of workplace observation trace evolving shifts in communication practices, short- and long-term planning, and role flexibility over time.

Future Applications and Extensions

This final section outlines how the Crisis Leadership Framework can be applied and extended in future research, professional practice, and organizational development. The purpose of the framework is not merely to categorize existing literature but to offer a generative structure that facilitates theory-building, research design, and strategic reflection across crisis phases and disciplinary traditions. To that end, this section proceeds in three parts. First, we identify practical applications and extensions of the framework, emphasizing how it may guide empirical research, leadership education, and policy assessment. Second, we surface research directions explicitly or implicitly suggested by existing studies. Third, we reflect on insights revealed through the application of the framework—insights that would remain obscured without a structured, meta-theoretical approach.

Applications and Extensions of the Crisis Leadership Framework

The Crisis Leadership Framework offers researchers and practitioners a systematic yet flexible tool for analyzing, designing, and evaluating crisis leadership. Its core structure allows

any leadership phenomenon to be conceptually located within a shared analytical space. This dimensional clarity enables both retrospective mapping of existing studies and forward-looking design of future research.

As a research scaffold, the framework helps clarify leadership's ontological form, causal role, and temporal position. It is especially valuable for longitudinal and multi-phase study designs, where leadership may operate as a cause in one phase and a consequence in another. It also supports structured comparison across studies by revealing variation in epistemology, method, and disciplinary assumptions. These properties make it useful in meta-analyses and integrative reviews that require clear classification schemes but often lack conceptual consistency.

In applied settings, the framework can serve as a diagnostic tool for assessing leadership capacity across crisis phases. Practitioners may use it to identify institutional tendencies—such as reliance on formal leaders vs. emergent practices—or to locate gaps in preparation, coordination, or recovery. In leadership education, the model encourages attention to both proactive and reflective competencies. It may also support curriculum design that balances trait development with communication training, scenario analysis, and postcrisis learning. In policy contexts, the framework provides a template for analyzing sector- or nation-level leadership systems by tracing when, where, and how leadership emerges or fails across the crisis lifecycle.

Future Research Directions

There are several underdeveloped areas in crisis leadership scholarship. First, most research continues to treat leadership as a stable, trait-based input or a set of discrete behaviors—rather than as a dynamic process shaped by context, feedback, and institutional learning.

Additional research is needed on leadership emergence, transformation, and distribution, particularly in long-duration and multi-actor crises.

Second, although many studies use rigorous methods to test short-term effects of leadership behaviors, few examine how those behaviors evolve across time or phases. Future research should explore cross-phase dynamics, where leadership functions differently as crises unfold—shifting from directive authority to collaborative adaptation, or from external persuasion to internal reflection.

Third, studies tend to focus on either internal or external audiences but rarely examine how leaders navigate the boundary between them. This creates an opportunity to investigate boundary-spanning leadership, especially how message strategies, trust-building, and ethical imperatives shift when leaders must communicate across organizational and public interfaces.

Fourth, although the studies reflect a range of disciplinary traditions, they often remain siloed in terms of theory, method, and context. The framework could guide more integrative, comparative research that explicitly tests whether findings in one discipline hold across others, or how leadership operates differently across sectors such as healthcare, education, or emergency management.

Finally, most studies concentrate on moments of acute disruption. Far fewer address leadership in the slow onset, chronic, or recovery phases of crisis—such as resilience building, institutional memory, or identity reconstruction. These processes are central to long-term effectiveness but remain empirically underexamined.

Insights From Framework Application

Applying the framework to existing research reveals not only patterns across configurations but also gaps and misalignments in how crisis leadership is conceptualized and

studied. It becomes clear that many studies implicitly adopt ontological or causal assumptions—such as treating leadership as a stable trait or as a discrete intervention—without naming them explicitly. The framework brings those assumptions to the surface, allowing clearer comparison across studies that might otherwise appear inconsistent or contradictory.

Application of the framework also highlights methodological clustering around certain configurations. For example, behavioral studies grounded in experimental or survey designs dominate causal configurations (Configurations 1 and 2), while interpretive methods and longitudinal designs appear primarily in consequence-based or postcrisis research (Configuration 4). These patterns suggest not only philosophical coherence within configurations, but also possible methodological blind spots—such as the limited use of interpretive or process-oriented methods in causal configurations, or the scarcity of trait-based models in postcrisis learning contexts.

By forcing a structured comparison, the framework reveals underexplored intersections, such as leading-as-consequence during precrisis preparation, or leader traits as outcomes of postcrisis identity reconstruction. It also demonstrates the utility of configuration-level synthesis: rather than evaluating studies solely on method or finding, researchers can assess how well each study fits its conceptual position within the broader field. This encourages more deliberate alignment between research questions, methods, and claims, while opening space for cumulative theory-building across disciplines.

Conclusion

The Crisis Leadership Framework offers a meta-theoretical foundation for organizing, analyzing, and advancing crisis leadership research. By synthesizing the dimensions of leader versus leading, cause versus consequence, and precrisis, crisis, and postcrisis phases, the

framework provides a generative structure for clarifying conceptual assumptions, guiding empirical inquiry, and supporting professional and institutional development. Demonstration of the framework's application across four distinct configurations shows the diversity of existing research and the field's need for greater integration, methodological pluralism, and theoretical precision. As crises continue to evolve in form, scale, and complexity, the framework equips scholars and practitioners with a durable tool for diagnosing leadership systems, designing resilient strategies, and cultivating reflective, adaptive leadership.

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Figure 1

The Crisis Leadership Framework