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What was that all about? On internal crisis communication and communicative coworkership during a pandemic

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Abstract

Purpose – The aim of this paper is to contribute with increased knowledge of the complex role of internal communication during a crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic. More specifically, the authors want to address the following research questions. How can the overall approach to internal crisis communication during the pandemic be interpreted, and what view of internal crisis communication does this approach reflect? What has been characteristic of the leadership communication during the pandemic? What do coworkers think of their communication role and how well does the internal communication support that role?

Design/methodology/approach – This article is based on a case study of an authority with 1,000 employees. The empirical material consists of both documents and interviews. The analyzed documents include steering documents, e-mails to managers from the support function and newsletters from the top manager. The 17 interviews comprise managers, coworkers and communication managers. All interviews were recorded and the authors have conducted verbatim transcriptions.

Findings – The pandemic is an example of a wicked problem that involves a lot of ambiguity. Often organizations try to handle wicked problems by trying to control it through traditional management skills and practices. A pandemic demands a leadership, culture and communicative approach that highlights the importance of coworkers. In the studied organization the authors found knowledge and rhetoric about the value of coworkers and communicative coworkership. However, top management does not encourage, support and award practices that are in line with the espoused culture. The key to success is top managers that walk the talk and act as role models.

Practical implications – Crisis managers and crisis communicators need to focus more on improvisation, flexibility, listening and how to approach and make sense of the uncertain. In general, there is a tendency to rely too much on simple tools and to oversimplify complexity. Complex crises such as the pandemic raise new demands on leadership. Effective crisis leadership in a complex crisis seems to be much more democratic and collaborative than often assumed. If coworkers are expected to act as ambassadors or organizational representatives, they also need to be given better support for that role.

Originality/value – This article highlights the importance of closing the gap between espoused and enacted culture in order to change from a managerialistic internal crisis communication to a process internal crisis communication approach.

Keywords Internal communication, Leadership, Communicative coworkership, Internal crisis communication

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

When talking about and preparing for crises, we tend to see them as relatively isolated and time-limited phenomena such as an accident, a natural disaster or a bomb threat. Even if these kinds of events are threatening to organizations and humans, the COVID-19 crisis that evolved in 2020 is much more complex and will last not only for weeks, but for months and

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perhaps even years (cf. Ansell *et al.*, 2010). It is also a global, transboundary crisis that influences societies at all levels and in different sectors. Although COVID-19 has not involved a crisis for all organizations, it has often induced huge organizational changes and had a substantial impact on the internal processes of organizations (Boin, 2019). As an example, from one day to the next, organizations had to find new ways of communicating, leading and organizing when employees were told to work from home. Some organizations had to deliver new products and services, and some organizations had to lay off employees. Thus, in many organizations the pandemic has involved unexpected situations filled with complexity and ambiguity. The American organizational psychologist Karl E. Weick (1993) describes such situations as cosmological episodes, when nothing makes sense and we humans ask ourselves: "what was that all about?" Such complex situations trigger sensemaking processes and raise new demands on internal communication, leadership and coworkership. The problem is that humans often try to manage complex, chaotic situations by simplifying and returning to ingrained practices, tested tools and old plans (Coutu, 2003; Lewis, 2000). In crisis communication, established practices and tools often imply a focus on communication with media and other external stakeholders in order to avoid negative media coverage and to repair the image of the organization (Heide and Simonsson, 2020). Many organizations are today aware of the importance of communication to manage and mitigate crises, but there is still a rather one-sided focus on external communication rather than internal crisis communication (Zaumane, 2016; Heide and Simonsson, 2019). Also, research indicates a need of not only to pay more attention to internal crisis communication, but also to develop a new understanding of its role and its complexity. Despite greater focus on communicative organizations, where coworkers act as active communicators and organizational representatives (Heide *et al.*, 2018), internal crisis communication still tends to be based on the notion of coworkers as receivers of information from managers (Frandsen and Johansen, 2011; Zaumane, 2016). We want rather to emphasize that coworkers have an active and crucial communication role – they are at the front end of the organization and hence they are the point of contact for many external stakeholders. The image they create and the input they receive from stakeholders will obviously affect how well the organization can manage a crisis. Consequently, it is crucial to give priority to internal communication that can reduce uncertainty and build trust, and in turn, enable coworkers to act as active communicators in a crisis situation. This also has implications for leadership communication in times of crises. While crisis management is often linked to rather authoritative leadership, there may be many crisis situations in which facilitating collective sensemaking, dialogue and listening to employees are more fruitful than conveying orders and instructions (Gilpin and Murphy, 2008).

This article is based on a case study of internal communication within an authority with national responsibility for managing crises and emergencies. Among other things, the authority has had a role of coordinating and supporting the information of other authorities and the government during the COVID-19 pandemic. It is an organization that has considerable experience in crisis management and crisis communication, and therefore it is especially interesting to study how this organization has handled the COVID-19 situation internally. As it is an organization that has had a major role in managing the pandemic on a national level, it is consequently also a well-known organization that has attracted a great deal of external attention. Thus, it is an organization where we can expect that the employees have received a great many questions in various situations and roles (not only at work, but also in their leisure time).

The aim of this article is to contribute greater understanding of the complex role of internal communication during a crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic. More specifically, we want to address the following research questions:

(1) How can the overall approach to internal crisis communication during the pandemic be interpreted, and what view of internal crisis communication does this approach reflect?

(2) What has been characteristic of communication by the leadership during the pandemic?

(3) What do coworkers think of their communication role and how well does internal communication support that role?

Different approaches to internal crisis communication

Crisis management and crisis communication are extensive fields of research, for which the mainstream approach has been to study different crisis cases and develop new managerial expertise on how to best handle such situations. Another characteristic is that researchers have mainly been interested in the acute phase of the crisis, while the precrisis and postcrisis phases have been understudied. Yet another characteristic is that almost all research has paid attention to external aspects of a crisis and external communication during a crisis (e.g. Frandsen and Johansen, 2011; Strandberg and Vigsø, 2016; Heide and Simonsson, 2014; Heide and Simonsson, 2015). Hence, strangely enough, the internal aspect has been ignored until a decade ago, when some publications on internal crisis communication appeared (Taylor, 2010; Frandsen and Johansen, 2011; Mazzei and Ravazzani, 2011). Internal crisis communication can be described as a merger of the two fields crisis communication and change communication (Heide and Simonsson, 2019). Both these fields focus on highly complex situations, where stakeholders and coworkers experience ambiguity and confusion. In other words, there is a great need of information, communication and sensemaking in order to understand a situation and be able to act. Further, badly handled internal crisis communication can turn the initial crisis into a double crisis, that negatively impoverishes organizational trust and image (Frandsen and Johansen, 2017). It should also be emphasized that internal crisis communication is both a prerequisite for managing an acute crisis, and an opportunity for preventing crises and learning from them (Frandsen and Johansen, 2017; David, 2011). Learning is also closely related to communication. To be able to learn, humans must first make sense of what happened, and an important means of sensemaking is various forms of communication with peers. Communication is also vital for the sharing of experiences, ideas, views and knowledge within the organization, which implies that it is through communication that individual learning can be transformed into collective learning (Weick and Ashford, 2001). Learning from a crisis, which can be described as organizational resilience, is a capacity to produce wisdom and knowledge from an earlier situation, and consequently develop the organization (cf. Wildavsky, 1988). A result of postcrisis learning is new response repertoires to better manage future, similar situations (Christianson *et al.*, 2009).

Internal crisis communication (ICC) is a multifaceted phenomenon that can be understood in different ways, which, in turn, is reflected in both research and practice. We will here discuss two broad approaches to internal crisis communication that will frame the analysis of the case study we have conducted. Research never starts from a white sheet or "ground zero." Rather all knowledge is based on pre-understandings that influence the interpretation of the empirical material (Alvesson and Sandberg, 2021). It is therefore important to be transparent and discuss what pre-understandings have driven the research. Below we present the two broad approaches to internal crisis communication, and we describe and discuss different philosophies of sciences, which influence the researchers' understanding of reality and belief as to how new knowledge can be gained. In another publication, we have described these two approaches to internal crisis communication as *The Managerialistic Approach to ICC* and

The Process Approach to ICC (Heide and Simonsson, 2020). Here we will further elaborate on the distinction between these two approaches based on the categories in Table 1.

The managerialistic approach to ICC is based on managerialism – a systemic logic that is based on a belief that all organizations can be optimized using generic management skills (Klikauer, 2013). Managers are perceived as rational actors who have the knowledge necessary to predict expected results and make optimal decisions (Alvesson and Sveningsson, 2011). The managerial logic is clearly linked to a basis in the philosophy of science, functionalism, that has been dominating US based research on crisis management and crisis communication. The aim of functionalistic research is to reach generalizable, law-like results that can serve as best practices and checklists that can help organizations to plan and manage crises more efficiently. Idealized rationalism, instrumentality, order, control, and predictability constitute the core of managerialism (Deetz, 1992). Translated to a crisis situation, this means that leaders act as commanders, or an in engineer-like way they analyze the situation, find the best possible solution and organize accordingly (Grint, 2005; Snowden and Boone, 2007). Hence, here there is a rather simplistic understanding of humans' ability to be rational and find the optimal solution based on collected, analyzed information. It also includes an exaggerated belief in the ability and importance of leaders to make rational, strategic decisions.

In this strand of thinking, crises are viewed as discrete events – most often coming from the outside – with more or less given meanings (Gilpin and Murphy, 2008). Crises are an anomaly, an exception that needs to be controlled. Internal crisis communication is something that primarily takes place during the acute phase and is primarily a tool to remedy the effects of the crisis. In line with the managerial logic, "the organization" refers to the senior management team and line managers; the organization and its leaders are an entity separate from its coworkers and external stakeholders. Coworkers are considered as a target group or as receivers of managerial communication rather than active communicators being part of the constitution of the organization. The managerialistic approach leans on a transmission-oriented view of communication – the focus is on finding the right channels to distribute information to the employees in rapid way. Since organizations are perceived as reified, stable containers in which communication occurs (Putnam, 1983), external and internal communications are treated as rather separate activities. We see this approach to internal crisis communication as obsolete, and not in line with the research front in organization studies, management, or communication studies. One of the biggest problems with this approach, at least from a strategic communication perspective, is that communication is

	Managerialistic ICC	Process ICC
Philosophy of science	Functionalism	Social constructionism
Crisis	An anomaly that needs to be controlled	A normal part of organizational development
Communication focus	Communication with internal stakeholders to convey instructions and updates	Communication is necessary to reduce ambiguity and facilitate sensemaking
Communication borders	Clear border of internal and external communication	Mutual relationship of internal and external communication
Managers	Make decisions in a rational way, apply best practices and provide employees with instructions	Improvise, probe, listen to and engage in dialogue with employees and stakeholders
Coworkers	Receivers and implementers of instructions and orders	Active communicators and key players in managing the crisis

Table 1.
Two approaches to internal crisis communication

reduced to a matter of transmission of information from an organization to receivers. Hence, the constitutive aspect of communication is ignored despite the fact that researchers have emphasized the constitutive role of communication since the 1920s (Dewey, 1922/2002).

The alternative position, the Process Approach to ICC is grounded in the philosophy of science social constructionism which implies a meaning-oriented view of communication. This approach is also closely related to the process perspective within organization studies that has been developed by well-known researchers such as Niklas Luhmann, Bruno Latour, Karl Weick and James March. Organizations and their environment are in this perspective not regarded as a stable phenomenon but as an ever continuing process of organizing where the organization is enabled. Accordingly, in the Process Approach to ICC, crises are understood as socially constructed, and it is emphasized that various publics and individuals may make sense of and understand the crisis differently. Thus, from this approach, communication is not reduced to a simplistic managerial tool or vehicle but is the very process that constitutes social reality and our perceptions of crises. Communications researchers within this perspective often claim that crises are characterized by confusion, ambiguity, and an experience of disorientation (Maitlis and Sonenshein, 2010).

An important presumption within the Process Approach to ICC is that crises are regarded as ongoing and natural stages in organizational life. While the crisis can be triggered by a specific event, it is linked to already existing actions with a past, present and future (Kersten, 2005). Thus, a crisis is a dynamic, continuous process rather than an isolated, exceptional event limited in time and space (Roux-Dufort, 2007). With inspiration from chaos and complexity theory, crises are usually seen as a resulting from several minor reciprocal events, which in turn are related to systemic occurrences (Bechler, 2004). The view of crises as processual and integrated phenomena is also linked to an emphasis on organizational culture. Crisis management and crisis communication are not activities that can be separated from "normal" organizational life, but are rather a reflection of the everyday culture of an organization (Kersten, 2005). Thus, organizational culture is an important aspect to cover in research on internal crisis communication.

As already mentioned, the Process Approach to ICC underlines the assumption that crises tend to be complex, ambiguous phenomena without any clear cause-effect relationships. Thus, rather than applying best practices, the leader's task is to improvise, to probe and allow the solution to reveal itself (Snowden and Boone, 2007). Such a leadership will also require a different kind of coworkership (Heide and Simonsson, 2011; Heide *et al.*, 2018). Coworkers are put in the very center of the organization – they are the ones who often have the knowledge needed to solve the crisis, they are the ones who meet and communicate with the many external stakeholders and hence, may work as positive or negative ambassadors during a crisis (Heide and Simonsson, 2019; Mazzei *et al.*, 2012). It is not that leaders are unimportant, but rather than being authoritative commanders they have a role as facilitators of sensemaking processes and of collaboration between coworkers and other actors necessary to make progress (Grint, 2005).

The Process Approach to ICC further brings an emphasis on the mutual dependence between internal and external communication. Thus, communication with external individuals and groups reflects the communication that takes place among organization members. And vice versa, communication in external media about the organization is something that has an impact on how managers and coworkers make sense of the situation.

The two perspectives presented may be perceived as polarizing stereotypes, and most often neither research nor practice, will appear to fulfill all characteristics or in a discrete way. Even so, the two approaches may serve as a heuristic device that can help us to better understand the way we communicate internally in times of crises and why. In this article we will focus on and develop the role of leadership communication and coworkers' communication in internal crisis communication. As might be fairly obvious from the

discussion above, we believe that the Managerialistic Approach to ICC ignores the constitutive aspect of communication, and thereby does not give enough attention to the communicative role of leaders and coworkers in handling crises. In the next section, we will further explore the Process Approach to ICC by discussing ambiguity, sensemaking and complicated, wicked problems.

Leadership, sensemaking and communication in crises

It has long been clear that there is a close relationship between leadership and communication (Tourish and Jackson, 2008). In practice, it is almost impossible to differ between leadership and communication when leaders spend the majority of their time communicating. Researchers (e.g. Smircich and Morgan, 1982) have, at least since the beginning of the 1980s, underlined leaders' vital task of organizational sensemaking. And it becomes even more evident during ambiguous situations such as crises, that leadership is closely related to sensemaking and communication (Weick, 1988, 1993). The Latin expression *panta rei* – everything flows – is certainly the case when an organization enters a crisis which is full of complexity and changes. Ambiguity is a situation where there are several meanings, or no obvious meaning at all (Carroll, 2015). When there is ambiguity, organizational members perceive a sudden loss of meaning. Weick (1993, p. 633 f.) calls such a situation a cosmology episode – it is a situation that feels like *vu jadé*: "I've never been here before, I have no idea where I am, and I have no idea who can help me." As is probably already clear, ambiguity cannot be solved with old tools, procedures, or information. To grasp and handle ambiguity is to enact a plausible next step and accept that there will be more ambiguity, not clarity and definitive answers. Hence, organizational members try to make sense of the ambiguous situation by acting and communicating, and may be helped by leaders who communicate and discuss with other leaders in the organization and with their coworkers. In an ambiguous situation, wise leaders focus on listening and by asking questions and, collaboratively with coworkers, making sense of the situation.

In the current pandemic situation, problems with leaders' decision-making have intensified (Tourish, 2020). Tourish claims that leaders are not provided with any help from mainstream leadership theories in the current ambiguous crisis environment. Too often leaders are only offered simple, "rational" and quick solutions that are promised to work. Tourish even draws the conclusion that the COVID-19 crisis is also a crisis of leadership theory and practice. However, even in a normal situation there is a cruel reality that leaders are expected to live up to standards of rationality, clarity, and foresight that in reality are not possible to obtain (Coutu, 2003). These standards are often reproduced in management magazines, and also fueled by research such as contingency theories that presume there is a "correct" response based on an analysis of a situation. Hence, there is a rigid belief that we humans can be completely rational and make optimal decisions based on "facts." In an interview, the professor in organizational psychology, Karl E. Weick reflects: "But if you tried to telling today's leaders to accept the fact that they're not quite as rational, deliberate, and intentional as they claim to be – and that that's okay, because that's the way humans are – I think most executives would not understand" (Coutu, 2003, p. 89). During Weick's whole career, he has claimed that organizations and humans are not as rational as usually thought, and this understanding is the root of many organizational problems. Weick (1969, 2020) claims that instead we must understand the process of sensemaking, and that we socially construct a reality that we act on.

Weick (1995) argues that there are two types of sensemaking occasions common to organizations – uncertainty and ambiguity. Another way to portray them is with the two concepts tame problem and wicked problem (Rittel and Webber, 1973). In situations that can be described as uncertain, and there exists a tame problem, humans need more information to

make sense and be able to act. Tame problems are characterized by a limited degree of uncertainty, and the problem has probably occurred earlier (Grint, 2005). This way of handling the situation is what is often regarded as rational – all possible information is collected, interpreted, and an optimal solution is developed based on the information. Grint claims that a tame problem is associated with management (rather than leadership) and it is the manager who suggests processes to solve the situation. Hence, the manager is expected to deliver the right answers.

To understand a complex and changing situation, such as a crisis, it could be worthwhile to differentiate between various forms of ambiguity. Carroll (2015) describes three different types: (1) fundamental, (2) causal and (3) role ambiguity. Fundamental ambiguity occurs when there are no existent categories to even describe what is going on. Causal ambiguity is a situation when we have some categories, but we cannot sort them into causal and meaningful relationships. For example, after a large organizational crisis it is fairly easy to assign causality, which is impossible during the crisis. Role ambiguity appears when it is difficult to decide who is responsible for what aspects of safety and which persons should be involved. In many organizations, there are often weak signals of upcoming problems or issues, and these signals are often ambiguous, i.e. fundamental ambiguity that may result in ignoration. Carroll (2015, p. 61) explains: "Bad news does not travel easily upward in organizations and fundamental ambiguity allows the news to be reframed in ways that are less threatening but also less meaningful and less urgent." This is also the reason that we advocate the process ICC where coworkers are both resources of detection and of co-producers of sensemaking and solutions.

Coworkers as communicators in crises

In recent years, there has been a growing consensus that employees – or coworkers, which is the term we prefer – have an important role as communicators in times of crises (Frandsen and Johansen, 2011; Heide and Simonsson, 2019). In such situations, there is a tendency among managers and communication practitioners to focus on top-down information distribution, and the underlying notion is that employees primarily have a role as receivers of instructions, orders, and updates (especially during the acute phase of the crisis). By using the term coworker, we want to stress that employees should not only be perceived as receivers, but also as senders, as active communicators before, during and after a crisis. In comparison to many mangers, a great number of coworkers work close both to the core business and external stakeholders – which means that they have direct experience of what happens in the "field" and have close communication with stakeholders. Coworkers are engaged in boundary-spanning activities in which they can listen and gather information as well as influence the image and reputation of the organization (Young, 2018). However, the communication role of coworkers does not only cover external communication, but also internal communication processes and different phases of a crises.

Coworkers are an important resource in the pre-crisis phase, as they can detect weak signals of problems and risks that can turn into a crisis (Snoeijers and Poels, 2018; Heide and Simonsson, 2018). As Mitroff (2001) argues, most crises send out continuous "early warning signals" long before they actually occur. Repeated complaints from customers and recurrent mistakes can be examples of such signals. Coworkers are often those who have the possibility to detect early warning signals, and thus they have an important role as a critic and a scout (Madsen Thøis and Verhoeven, 2019). However, to enable and motivate coworkers to communicate problems and mistakes, there is a need of a culture and leadership that foster the idea of mistakes as learning opportunities (Weick and Sutcliffe, 2007).

During the crisis, coworkers are to implement management decisions and contribute to handling the crisis. Employees are certainly receivers of crisis information, but rather than

passively absorbing managers' communication, they also act as active sensemakers (Madsen Thøis and Verhoeven, 2019), which may mean that they sometimes reject or reinterpret the intended meaning (Mazzei and Ravazzani, 2011; Strandberg and Vigsø, 2016). However, coworkers should not only be treated as implementers of management decisions, they can also brief managers about stakeholders' reactions and help managers to make more informed decisions. Coworkers also have an important role as an ambassador or advocator during a crisis, and it is therefore vital to have internal communication that builds internal trust and identification with the organization (Men, 2014; Andersson, 2019; Mazzei *et al.*, 2012). During an acute crisis phase there is often a complex interplay between external and internal communication, and to keep the loyalty of employees, it is important to comment on and discuss external media reporting internally (Heide and Simonsson, 2019, 2020).

After a crisis, coworkers' willingness and possibility to share their experiences are important to create organizational learning and to be better prepared for future crises. In the post-crisis phase where questions of guilt and responsibility are salient, coworkers are also a valuable resource as defenders or as promoters (Madsen Thøis and Verhoeven, 2019).

In sum, coworkers as communicators are important in crisis management. The question though, is whether the internal communication processes (including leadership communication) act as barriers or as enablers of active and supportive coworker communication.

Research design

Qualitative researchers that take qualitative methodology seriously reflect on the epistemology that has guided their research (cf. Alvesson and Sandberg, 2021). In line with social constructionism, as we depart from in this study, we do not believe it is possible to catch, describe or explain an objective world "as it is". The reality is socially constructed through humans' action, interpretation and communication (Berger and Luckmann, 1966). This research is based on a qualitative case study. With case studies there is a possibility of generating unique, context dependent knowledge which is an advantage in the development of new knowledge (Flyvbjerg, 2006). When the goal is to receive as much information about a phenomenon as possible, neither the typical nor the average organization will be the best choice (Flyvbjerg, 2006). It is then more suitable to choose an extreme case where the phenomenon is more common, and it is easier to produce a rich empirical material. The studied organization can be described as an extreme case while it ought to have very good prerequisites for internal crisis communication. We have been studying the national crisis authority that is accountable for emergency and crisis management and civil defense. One can ask – if this organization cannot communicate during a crisis, then who can?

The empirical material consists of internal documents and interviews. Our ambition was to receive steering documents that set the ground and frame for the communication coworkership, and that could help us to get a better understanding of the organization prerequisites. The analyzed documents include steering documents such as a mission plan, a communication policy, a communication strategy, rules of procedures, a crisis communication strategy, a coworker and leader policy, and a social media policy. We have also analyzed summaries of communication activities carried out during COVID-19 (February–September 2020), four e-mails to managers from the support function and weekly newsletters from the Director General during the period February 10 to August 31. We were also permitted access to the intranet where we collected information that we found interesting and valuable for the study such as information about the pandemic situation and what kind of activities that were undertaken by the organization.

In total, we have conducted 17 semi-structured interviews in the organization. We have used a purposive sampling strategy that was based on strategic choices about whom we preferred to interview (Palys, 2008; Patton, 2002). Since our goal was to get a broad

understanding of internal crisis communication at this authority, we interviewed three different staff categories: managers (6 persons), coworkers (9 persons), and communication managers (2 persons). To find suitable interviewees, we instructed our contact person to compile a list of candidates based on our ambition to receive voices with different roles, at various hierarchical levels in the organization and with divergent experiences and work tasks.

In the interviews, we focused on two broad themes: perceptions and experiences of internal communication during the pandemic period, and perceptions of the role of coworkers' communication. Examples of questions from the interview guide are: "Do you feel that there are any expressed expectations of you in your communication with external groups?", "What prerequisites are required to be able to represent the organization in a good way / exercise a communicative task?", and "How do you experience the internal communication climate?" All interviews were recorded, and we have made verbatim transcriptions.

From a social constructionism perspective, interviewing is not about discovering already existing ideas and meanings inside the interviewee. It is rather a mutual process of knowledge acquisition where the interview conversation may evoke new insights and ideas for both the interviewer and the interviewee (Brinkmann and Kvale, 2014). We have used the empirical material to better understand the situation in the studied organization from the perspective of coworkers, managers, and communication practitioners. The empirical material has also been used to rethink the obvious and to challenge the obvious and taken-for-granted within the field (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2011). In general, there is an over-belief among many researchers in social sciences that empirical "data" has a robustness and an intrinsic value that simply can guide or be arbitrator for evident knowledge claims (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2011). There is also a belief that theory and data are individual entities, and the overarching goal is to look for a perfect match between them. Since we depart from a social constructionistic approach, we understand the reality and knowledge as socially constructed (Gergen, 1999). Thus, "data" are not that distinct and precise, and do not only have one obvious meaning. We have consequently not been focusing on finding the "objective" truth.

The analysis work consists of several steps. We started naturally with categorizing the material, and then we tried to reduce it, to make it more handleable. This is the more descriptive part of the analysis. After that we started to look for patterns and tendencies, and also different viewpoints, contradictions, and aspects that stuck out. The analysis of the empirical material is based on abduction, which was originally developed by the American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce (1978). With this analysis technique, we have worked iteratively, and gone back and through between theory and the empirical material to produce new insights and understandings. The empirical material can then serve as partner for critical dialogue, rather than as a mirror of reality. Abduction has the merit of problematizing and re-thinking dominating ideas, theory, and practice, when the empirical material stimulates and motivates new thinking (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2007, 2011; Alvesson and Sandberg, 2013).

Results and analysis

Before presenting the results from the interviews and the document analysis, we will provide a brief presentation of the authority we have studied. After that there are three separate sections which address the research questions presented above: the overall approach to internal crisis communication; leadership communication; and coworkers' communication role and how the internal communication supports that role.

The case organization

According to the governmental mission given to the authority, it is responsible for crisis management and public safety issues as long as no other authority has the responsibility.

In other words, it has a broad and diffuse role, which includes supportive and operative tasks as well as coordinating ones. It should also be noted that compared to other, more traditional and limited, crisis situations such as a gas leakage or a large forest fire, the role of the authority during the pandemic is even more unclear. During the pandemic, the authority, among other things, arranges joint press conferences about the current situation and is responsible for a major information campaign to citizens in the country. The authority has about 1,000 employees and is the result of a merger between three smaller expert authorities. The merger took place more than ten years ago, but there is still a feeling among many coworkers that the old organizations exist within the new authority, not least when it comes to values and other cultural aspects. During the pandemic a so called "special organization" has been set up with the task to focus on COVID-19 related tasks and issues. Some of the staff from the regular line organization have been on loan to the special organization for longer or shorter periods.

Internal crisis communication – a neglected area colored by the managerialistic approach

During the last few years, the authority has worked with five overall communication strategies. One of these five strategies has been to develop internal communication – motivated in the following way: "The organization's ability to communicate internally is a matter of leadership, coworkership and work environment, and it is also a prerequisite for cohesive external communication." However, when we examine the documents which specifically address crisis communication, the focus on internal communication is not visible. In the authority's strategy for crisis communication, internal communication is only mentioned in one sentence in the five pages that the document consists of: "What we communicate externally should always be communicated internally beforehand." In a document presenting a description of the communicative situation in late May (almost four months after the first COVID-19 case in the country) it is stated that internal communication planning is insufficient due to lack of time. In the summary of the communicative actions conducted by the communication departments during the first fifteen weeks of the crisis, there are also very few actions for internal communication.

The interviews indicate that internal communication was rather slow and sparse in the beginning of the pandemic, which clearly mirrors the lack of strategies and preparedness for internal crisis communication. One interviewee claims that "we were caught off guard" when it comes to internal communication. Another interviewee elaborates that picture:

> The first months or the first six weeks, there was no information about what we, the authority, were doing. There was no time for that, it was neglected. But to be a good ambassador, you must know what is going on. (Coworker)

However, after a while the distribution of information on the intranet took speed – special "corona-sites" were introduced on the intranet and updated frequently. The intranet has been described as the main internal channel for COVID-19-related information – both in interviews and in e-mails to managers.

Among the interviewees, we find those who argue that they are quite satisfied with the internal communication during the pandemic. They feel that there is a lot of information available at the intranet and they know who to contact if they would need more information. It does not always seem that these interviewees need or want to have a lot of communication about the current situation – they think it is enough to know that there is information available if needed. From one perspective it seems perfectly fine (and perhaps also efficient) that not all employees spend time being constantly updated about the role and actions of the authority, but if coworkers are to take a role as active communicators, we need them to go beyond the their own specific tasks and to at least some extent engage also in organization

wide issues. However, there are also interviewees who think that internal communication has worked quite poorly throughout the process. Some of those who are dissatisfied argue that there is a need of more communication – especially about the role of the authority and what they are doing:

> The story about what we are doing is not that clear internally. [. . .] We should tell what the operational unit is doing. What are we doing – really? I think it should have been a rather concrete description. (Manager)

The role and the actions of the authority seem to be what the interviewees find most urgent to have more knowledge of and to better understand. Most of the staff have not been directly involved in the management of the issues and problems related to the pandemic since these have been handled by the so-called special organization. Thus, to make sense of the role and actions of the authority it is necessary to attain some insight into the special organization. However, the interviewees often bring up communication between the special organization and the rest of the organization as a source of misunderstandings and frustration. As mentioned above, the authority has a very broad mission and includes many different specialists. The fact that the authority is a result of a merger seems to have contributed further to problems with internal silos. The special organization has apparently given rise to new tensions and further added to this "silo" problem. Some of those who are members of the special organization think that the rest of the organization does not understand that it is not a normal situation now. On the other hand, among those who have not been members of the special organization, we find experience of a special organization that does not really listen to, or take advantage of, the routines and expertise that exist in the "regular" line organization:

> My experience is that when a crisis occurs, this authority does not apply the routines and the channels we already have established, but we start reinventing the wheel. We have run so fast that we have forgotten that we have a good line organization that has certain routines that can be used. People think they will take a short cut but instead we get a delay. (Manager)

Other interviewees talk about a feeling of "us" and "them" – the special organization has been inside a bubble, while the rest of the organization has been outside it and feel that their competences have not been used. Considering the complex nature of the pandemic, the role and the work methods must have been rather fluid, unpredictable, and hard to pinpoint. Applying Carroll's (2015) different categories of ambiguities, there seems to be a situation of role ambiguity which not only leads to confusion and time waste, but also tensions and loss of togetherness in the organization. As Carroll argues, role ambiguity is related to goal ambiguity (e.g. line organization focusing more on systematic work and a holistic perspective while the special organization is focusing on finding rapid solutions for specific problems), which rarely can be solved by logical arguments or more informative facts. This rather needs to be accepted and subject to dialogue, with new understanding emerging from conversations over time.

To sum up, while internal communication is presented as a prioritized area in the overall communication strategy of the authority, this is not mirrored in the crisis strategy documents or in the actual communication practices during the pandemic. As discussed above, internal communication was quite neglected in the very beginning of the pandemic and once it was given more attention the primary focus seems to have been to publish information and updates on the intranet. The focus on information dissemination rather than inviting to meetings and dialogue can be interpreted as a sign of a transmission-oriented view of communication and not recognizing the problems of ambiguity in a crisis like this – i.e. following a managerialistic approach. The findings further indicate the need of not only top-down communication, but also horizontal communication between coworkers that could contribute to increased understanding of each other's roles and to a sense of "togetherness."

As discussed above, organizational subcultures that existed before the crisis, were evident during the crisis and the new special organization added further to the problems of silos.

Leadership communication

In a crisis situation, which is characterized by considerable ambiguity, there is always a great need of sensemaking, and organizational members turn to management to get help, i.e. there is an expectation of managers to interpret the situation and decide what to do (Carroll, 2015). It is fairly common that managers handle this expectation with the engineer's stance (Vidal, 2015). This stance is guided by a logical and rational approach with a belief that it is possible to control the situation that in turn makes organizational members confident to act. Behind such stance is a belief that more information is the solution to overcome ambiguity. In the studied authority, the engineer stance dominates, with heavy focus on disseminating information as regards leadership communication.

As the pressure to focus on internal crisis management increased, the management started to inform coworkers regularly with instructions and updates. Also, an analysis of the weekly newsletters implies that there is a broadcasting and publishing culture which results in lot of published information on the intranet as mentioned above. One of the coworkers reflects on internal communication during the pandemic:

> There are a lot of things that have been documented, and if I really want to know I can go there and read it. Nothing is kept secret, certainly not. But sometimes it is like [. . .] the important thing is that the information is there and can be told, but the message itself is not that important.

This way of handling the internal communication can be interpreted as an over-belief in the power of information and an underestimation of the need for facilitating collective sensemaking processes in the organization. There are several indicators that the organization is characterized by a managerialistic ICC with a conviction that coworkers can rationally handle the information and act accordingly (Heide and Simonsson, 2020).

The Director General (DG) is a role model for managers in the organization, and he has the highest position. He seems to have a robust internal reputation, is often visible in the organization, and is rewarded for his communicative ambition:

> I think the DG has been clear. He has weekly letters, for example, where he writes and short videos on the intranet. So, there has been a focus on corona management and I believe no other DGs in the country have worked that well.

The DG is also much appreciated for regularly thanking coworkers for their efforts. In the weekly newsletter he sometimes comments on the information and suggestions that he has received. But as we interpret the texts the DG acts as a strong leader who has the answers and does not invite or encourage coworkers to new conversations. A top manager that we interviewed underlined that the DG knows what is expected of him from a modern management perspective, but he seldom gets involved in real dialogue with coworkers. The analysis of newsletters further shows that the DG's prompts to coworkers are quite abstract. For example, the DG requests coworkers to avoid the silo thinking in the organization and start learning more from each other by calling colleagues and wonder how they are doing. But it remains an open question whether the DG has initiated or facilitated a cooperative and supportive culture, or secured the existence of arenas for communication and collaboration over the internal organizational borders. There are still power structures, competition between departments, hierarchies, routines, structures, and traditions that hinder a more communicative organization.

> It is a relatively anxious authority. And I think that is because we are still looking for the mandate. Because it is not completely clear, and there is a lot to our own interpretation. The authority has the

> responsibility, if no one else is responsible, well, but then we will start by sorting out the responsibilities when things happen. Then the pandemic is new to us. We are more confident in what to do with accidents – forest fires, floods, and other more traditional things. This crisis has really challenged us. Who could predict the social effects and consequences?

During the COVID-19 crisis, the management team has, according to an interviewed communication practitioner, had the ambition to be more open with their decisions, inform about management team meetings, and publish short filmed interviews with some of the managers directly after their meetings. In the more normal situation, coworkers are invited to have a coffee with the Director General (DG) and to receive answers to questions. An important aspect during a crisis is the psychological dimension such as handling fear that a crisis might have developed (Heide and Simonsson, 2019). An interviewed manager underlines the importance of trying to comfort coworkers. It is then important to have an open communication climate and open the discussion about things that make coworkers worried or afraid that stands in contrast to a culture of silence. One impression from the interviews is that managers in the organization often focus on tasks or practical issues in their communication. Our analysis of the executive e-mails also shows that these are primarily task-oriented, not on reducing coworkers' worry. Among issues that are handled in these e-mails are practical aspects such as how to work at home, that it is possible to borrow office chairs, what to do if a colleague gets infected and holiday planning. A top manager that we interviewed complains that many managers only distribute information in the executive e-mails that all managers receive. This interviewee considers that too many managers do not take the communication responsibility seriously, and therefore get reduced to being e-mail carriers instead of sensemaking managers that help coworkers to understand and make sense of a situation. Another communication practitioner reveals that managers in the organization often declare that communication is important, but she is not convinced that they know what it entails. Interviewees have also told us that there have been no guidelines or clear expectations of managers' communication during the pandemic. Taken together, this indicates that there might be a need to discuss and clarify the communication role of managers.

The communicative role of coworkers

In our study of the authority, we noticed some rather mixed or even contradictory results concerning the communication role of coworkers. As discussed above, the internal communication has been focused on information distribution – especially top-down from management to coworkers. Certainly, we have interviewed coworkers who think that their manager has asked for and listened to their ideas and experiences. Coworkers that have been part of the special organization have also been asked to hand in daily reports of any possible challenges that need to be discussed at the echelons higher up in the organization. Nevertheless, the paramount pattern is that the internal communication has been focused on providing employees with information rather than focusing on how to interpret it and how to facilitate horizontal or bottom-up communication. However, when looking into various policy and strategy documents, we find that coworkers are expected to take an active communication role externally. For example, in the communication strategy it is stated that coworkers have an important role to build stronger external relations: "The authority's coworkers should be better able to represent the entire authority at external meetings, seminars etc. It is about messages, meeting technique and attitude."

In the interviews with coworkers, they agree on the responsibility to represent the authority – it is part of being professional and it is, more or less, taken for granted. When we ask them to specify what it means to represent the organization, we get various responses. Some give answers like: "showing good and nice treatment of external stakeholders" and

"behaving well in traffic when driving a car with the authority logo." These replies are very much about what it means to be professional in any kind of organization. Other interviewees go beyond that and highlight the importance of a better understanding of "what it means to be part of this authority" and "what our role and mission really is". Some also call for a more continuous discussion about issues like these. Thus, representing the organization is not only about professional encounters, but also about making sense of "what is this all about" and acting accordingly. Again, we see that the broad, diffuse mission of the authority gives rise to an ambiguity that needs to be addressed if the coworkers are to be able to represent the entire organization. Some argue that this problem has come to the fore during the current crisis:

> There are columnists and others who think that we are a "talking authority", that we just are in a lot of meetings and like that. If we fail in explaining internally, what the hell is our task in the corona management so that everyone understands, so that you can carry the flag at the dinner table on Friday night at the neighbor's, then we have not succeeded. (Manager)

There is ongoing strategy work that aims to create a common target and direction towards 2030. In the document describing this strategy it is mentioned that internal and external communication need to be better coordinated and that the current core values do not give enough guidance on how to carry out the mission. Thus, there is clearly an awareness of the problem illustrated in the quotes. In one of the Director General's newsletters, he also presents a "fast track" to a story about the authority, which the communication department has produced. The fast track is rather detailed, and divided into three parts. The first two parts are common to the entire organization and the third part is where each employee talks about their own role. The initiative is clearly a response to finding a way to describe the role of the authority, but if the fast track is treated as a script to be read and read out, then it will probably be of little help in making sense of what the authority's role is all about. Again, we see signs of a reliance on information distribution, rather than focusing on dialogic conversations that can reduce the experienced ambiguity. de Ridder (2004) in a study of the role of internal communication in engendering supportive employees, found that non-task related information, i.e. organizational issues related to goals, problems and policy, is crucial to create trust in management and a supportive employee attitude. The call for more communication about the authority's role and mission expressed by the interviewees in the study at hand, indicates that de Ridder's finding is valid not only in stable, regular times but also in crisis situations.

Concluding discussion

In this article, we have tried to go beyond the traditional idea of employees as solely receivers of internal communication and a focus on internal crisis communication as a matter of media management or a message service. Internal crisis communication has a much more important and complex role than that, namely to facilitate sensemaking of ambiguous situations and to enable coworkers to take an active communication role, both internally and externally. We have also argued and tried to demonstrate that the Process Approach to ICC is needed to advance both theory and practice.

A crisis works as a kind of litmus-test for an organization's communication. As internal communication is the lifeblood of an organization, the value of the communication in an organization becomes clear in a crisis. Yet, internal communication is all too often taken-for-granted, neglected, and tends to have lower status than external communication (Dahlman and Heide, 2021). That applies to "normal" organizational life, but is especially salient in terms of crises. This was also the case in the authority we have studied. Internal communication was not part of the crisis preparedness plans, which especially in the beginning of the crisis, was reflected in negligible focus on internal communication. As in many other organizations,

we also noticed an emphasis on senior managers, and an unstated belief that organizational value first and foremost is created at the top of the organization (Snowden and Boone, 2007). This mirrors the managerialistic approach to ICC where managers are expected to act in a rational way and provide employees with information. However, from the Process Approach to ICC the main function of internal communication is not to transport information, but to enable sensemaking processes and promote active communication behaviors at all levels (Mazzei, 2010).

Although the actual internal communication practices tend to reflect the managerialistic approach to ICC, we can still find widespread acknowledgement of the value of communication and there are also ideas and ambitions clearly in line with the Process Approach to ICC. The problem though, is that there seems to be a discrepancy between knowledge (what is known), rhetoric (what is said), and practice (what is done) – which is shown in Figure 1. The model includes some parallels to the distinction between espoused values and enacted values (Gray *et al.*, 2017). Gray *et al.* argue that espoused values are those values that are officially accepted and that are reflected in an organization's documents such as mission and vision statements, policies, and standard operating procedures. Enacted values represent what actually happens and is done within the organization. Knowledge and rhetoric in the model may both refer to espoused values. When analyzing various texts and documents (The Director General's newsletter, news on the intranet, policy and steering documents, etc.) it is sometimes difficult to know whether the values and ideas espoused there are an expression of knowledge, or solely rhetoric. As we see it, knowledge is linked to a solid understanding, whereas rhetoric can be a result of lip service or just imitating management trends. To further develop the internal crisis communication towards the Process Approach expressed in the strategy documents, there needs to be a closer alignment between the three components of knowledge, rhetoric, and practice.

In the studied organization, we found two major strands of discrepancies, or tensions, in the internal crisis communication. Coworkers are internally very much treated as passive receivers of information, but externally they are expected to act as senders and active communicators. The policy and steering documents express expectations of coworkers to be active communicators and represent the entire organization. However, during the pandemic the communicative practices have been characterized by top-down information

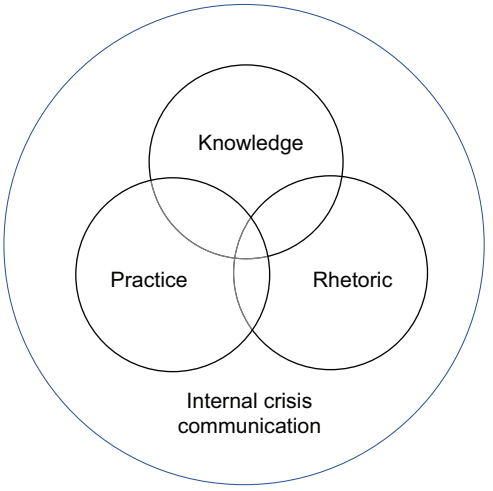

Figure 1.
Discrepancy between knowledge (what is known), rhetoric (what is said) and practice (what is done)

dissemination, rather than horizontal (coworker-coworker) or bottom-up communication. Once again, we can see the importance to reflect on what the perspective is on internal crisis communication in an organization, if we as researchers would like to analyze it or as practitioners would like to develop an organization's internal crisis communication. Further, this tension is an example of the fact that it in almost every large organization there exist many discrepancies and paradoxes (cf. Fairhurst *et al.*, 2016).

Another discrepancy concerns ambiguity and how that is dealt with. One recurrent ambiguity in the empirical material is the vague role and mission of the authority. It is also clear that this ambiguity has become even more salient during the pandemic – partly because a crisis often reinforces problems that existed before the crisis occurred (cf. Kersten, 2005), partly because this is a new kind of crisis that the authority usually is not involved in. As mentioned above, in documents and texts we find an awareness of the need to clarify the role and the core values of the authority. Some measures have been taken, but these do not seem to match the complexity of the defined problem. The impression is that the managers tend to shy away from the fact that the organization's role and mission are ambiguous and try to solve the problem by providing more information. Nevertheless, more information can never solve an ambiguous situation. What is needed are sensemaking processes to address puzzling questions, to make sense and move toward action (Weick *et al.*, 2005; Weick, 1995). As has been emphasized earlier in this article, managers have an important role in facilitating communication and sensemaking. Weick (2020) reminds us that organizing is ultimately an interpersonal communication process that brackets and stabilizes some parts of an everchanging and complex reality. An alternative route could have been to openly acknowledge the vague role and focus on joint conversations to reduce this ambiguity. Such a route would have required another kind of leadership including a more active communication role. Rather than rather passively disseminating bits and pieces of information it would be necessary to actively facilitate sensemaking processing. Managers can do this by actively framing and contextualizing messages (Smircich and Morgan, 1982), and also by initiating and facilitating conversations in which they listen and ask questions (Grint, 2005).

To sum up, the study demonstrates that several documents and texts tend to reflect the Process Approach to ICC, while the actual practices tend to be grounded in a managerialistic approach. We have seen examples of an ambition to be a transparent, open organization and to enable coworkers to take an active communication role. Yet, the solutions and the practices meant to support these ambitions are stuck in a transmission view of communication. One important step to reduce the identified discrepancies is to try find new practices, new ways of communicating, and also to inquire, encourage, support, and reward practices that are in line with the espoused values. The problem is that many organizations are not enduring enough when it comes to change of values, views, and corresponding practices. Often these kinds of grand challenges are treated as a Teflon-question – they are too complex to be handled and the organization instead focuses on repeating old solutions and using old tools (Heide and Simonsson, 2015). Endurance is the key to success. It may take two or three years before there are some enduring changes in practice when management has started to change the organization culture (cf. Hamel and Zanini, 2020).

Implications

In this study, we have focused on internal communication during the COVID-19 pandemic, which is a rare and unusual crisis that is more protracted and more complex compared to many other organizational crises such as a product recall or a workplace accident. Even though it is a rare crisis, we can still learn a lot from it, as crises in general are becoming more complex in nature (Boin and Lagadec, 2000). In the authority we studied, there was no previous experience of a crisis as complex as the pandemic, and there also seemed to be lack of

preparedness for it. Also, in our previous research on internal crisis communication, we have found examples of the need to take on a broader crisis view and embrace the increasing complexity of crisis (Heide and Simonsson, 2015, 2019).

The pandemic can be seen as an example of a so called wicked problem, which involves a lot of ambiguity (Rittel and Webber, 1973). Far too often, organizations try to handle wicked problems by trying to control them through traditional management skills and practices (Grint, 2005), but complex problems can only be solved through complex solutions (Weick, 1995). Rather than meeting the complex crisis with simple check-lists, protocols, contingency plans and effective information distribution, crisis managers and crisis communicators need to focus more on improvisation, flexibility, listening and how to approach and make sense of the uncertain (Gilpin and Murphy, 2008). This does not mean that plans, check-lists or information channels are useless or unimportant, but there is a tendency to rely too much on such tools and to oversimplify the complexity.

Complex crises such as the pandemic raise new demands on leadership. To put it simply, there is more need of crisis leadership and less of crisis management (Mitroff, 2004; Grint, 2005). While crisis management is mainly a top-down process focused on providing answers of how to organize and solve the problem, leadership is rather a matter of asking the right questions to gain a better understanding of the situation. Thus, effective crisis leadership in a complex crisis seems to be much more democratic and collaborative than is often assumed, and this needs to be taken into account in leadership training (Muffet-Willett and Kruse, 2009). In the authority we studied, the experience of unclear role of the organization and the problems with internal silos, are examples of the need for more crisis leadership.

Another implication from the study at hand, is that if coworkers are expected to act as ambassadors or organizational representatives, they also need to be given better support for that role. Again, it is not only about providing coworkers with rapid information and facts, it is also about giving room for dialogue about the information and to address the bigger questions about the role and mission of the organization.

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