The nub of decision making

The dilemmas and challenges facing crisis decision makers are well known but there is a relative scarcity of guidance about the practicalities of converting information and analysis into decisions - the nub of decision making. This paper aims to address that gap, enabling organisations to be more confident in their ability to make timely and optimal decisions in a crisis.

Decision making process models

The new ISO standard contains a process model for crisis decision making[1]:

The ISO process above is similar to others often used by crisis management teams (CMTs) such as aviation decision making processes FOR-DEC[2] and T-DODAR[3], and the OODA loop[4], a widely used process originally developed by a US Air Force officer. The steps of each process can be seen in the table below:

Process model	ISO 22361 - SDODAR	OODA loop	FOR-DEC	T-DODAR
Steps	Situation Direction Options Decision Action Review	Observe Orient Decide Act	Facts Options Risks/Benefits - Decisions Execute Check	Time - Diagnosis Options Decide Act/assign Review

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[1] BS EN ISO 22361:2022, Security and resilience - Crisis management – Guidelines, Section 7: Strategic crisis decision-making, BSI Standards Ltd, 2022, p.23, clause 7.1, Figure 5
[2] FOR-DEC – see http://aviationknowledge.wikidot.com/aviation:fordec
[3] T-DODAR - see www.mindtools.com/a76muw1/the-tdodar-decision-model
[4] OODA – see www.mindtoolsom/a3ldgz1/ooda-loops

Note that many of the steps are very similar (particularly in the last three steps, typically Decision, Action, Review) and each model has its own distinctive merits. All of these models are iterative: in other words, they do not happen once; they are repeated again and again as the situation changes.

The OODA loop model emphasises the requirement to respond judiciously and quickly to changes in the environment and can thus be useful where there is an element of competition. Some have asserted that the OODA loop is particularly suited to 'the VUCA world' – a world in which volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity reign[5].

Both aviation processes arose out of the aviation industry's recognition that human factors play a vital role in flight safety. This process was called Crew (or Cockpit) Resource Management (CRM)[6] and has been transferred to other sectors such as transportation, healthcare and firefighting. Given its origins, it may be particularly suited to fault-finding and solving technical problems. T-DODAR explicitly addresses the issue of time criticality – in its initial step, it requires the team to identify how much time they have to make decisions. This means you can be more deliberate if you have time on your side, but you can prioritise if time is short.

The ISO standard's SDODAR process is practical and suited to all types of decision making, and it includes an important step when crisis managers explicitly set a direction – in other words, they generate a strategic mission statement – 'this is what we want to achieve and why'.

In this paper, we focus narrowly on three steps of this process – Direction, Options and Decision, as in ISO 22361 (or their equivalents in red font in the other models).

Direction

ISO 22361 sums up Direction with some questions: 'What end-state is desired? What is [sic] the aim and objectives of the crisis response? What over-arching values and priorities will inform and guide this?'[7] We think this needs some explanation. Although setting direction can be a very straightforward affair, it is always worth giving it due consideration and ensuring that everyone in the crisis management team (CMT) understands and shares it. It is a strategic level statement – it clarifies your strategic intent, and it does not stray into operational complexity.

The most important element of Direction is your strategic mission statement – a concise, clear statement of what you want to achieve and why.

> For example, in the case of a kidnap:
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> "*Mission: To secure the release of the employee safely in order to reunite her with her family.*"

Where possible, only one statement should be used in a strategic mission statement but, in complex situations, a number of other objectives may be added.

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[5] https://www.vuca-world.org/ooda-loop/
[6] https://www.flightdeckfriend.com/ask-a-pilot/what-is-crm/
[7] BS EN ISO 22361:2022, Security and resilience - Crisis management – Guidelines, Section 7: Strategic crisis decision-making, BSI Standards Ltd, 2022, p.22, clause 7.1.

> For example, in the case of a sexual abuse case causing reputational damage to an organisation:
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> *Mission: To re-establish internal and external confidence in the organisation in order to restore our ability to operate.*
> *Objectives:*
> - *Ensure that the victim is looked after in a survivor-centred manner.*
> - *Make changes in culture, policies and procedures to ensure such cases never occur again.*

You may also want to define some parameters. In our experience, these are often obvious but sometimes benefit from being spelt out in writing at the start of a response, e.g.:
- We will operate legally throughout.
- We will act in line with our organisation's purpose and values.

If it wasn't done during the 'Situation' stage, then the team should at this point consider two important matters:

a. **Worst-case scenarios,** so that the team can have the best chance of avoiding them, e.g., "It would be disastrous if the oil slick were to reach the coast". You will decide how to avoid this scenario later in the process.
b. **Stakeholders or, to use the ISO's terminology, 'interested parties',** i.e., identify those who are affected by the situation, or who might have an impact upon it. This can help you later as you consider options (and particularly in developing your communications plan, because interested parties are often communication audiences).

Once you have a clear and agreed Direction, you are ready to move to the next step of generating Options.

Options

A vital part of crisis leadership is to manage time. In terms of generating options, there is a tension between the need to produce options and make decisions quickly, but not to quash original and creative thinking. There are many 'ideation techniques', but probably the most well known and most successful is 'brainstorming[8]. The original aim of brainstorming was exactly that – to create a streamlined, structured process that encouraged 'unstructured', i.e., creative thinking.

The role of the leader in enabling this sort of thinking is demanding – it requires a combination of strong leadership and self-restraint. It is vital that the team should first generate ideas, and that judgement of those ideas should come at a later stage. Once the flow of ideas has ended, the CMT considers each idea in turn. The leader ensures that each idea is given a fair hearing. It's now that the leader takes a more forthright role. It's likely that time will be critical, so the leader will need to keep a certain pace – and indeed may give a time bar (e.g., 'we must finish this within an hour'). Some ideas will be adopted as options; others will be discarded, at least for now.

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[8] Osborn A., Applied Imagination: Principles and Procedures of Creative Problem-Solving, Scribner, New York, 1963

It is time to take the next step of turning Options into Decisions.

Decision

Seasoned crisis managers will have seen how easy it is for a CMT to fall into the trap of avoiding decision making by endlessly seeking more information or arguing ceaselessly over the risks and benefits of varying options. It's useful, therefore, to inject some structure into the process of converting analysis and options into decisions. Indeed, in the new ISO standard's summary of effective crisis decision making, it notes the benefit of 'training CMT members in the use of decision [making] techniques to reduce the effect of uncertainty on their cognitive abilities'[9].

There are numerous decision-making tools. Some are very obvious, such as risk/benefit analysis and SWOT analysis. For technological crises, or where there is an element of fault-finding, then decision trees and cause-and-effect or fishbone analysis can be useful. For politically or socially complex crises, it can be useful to apply techniques such as De Bono's six hats[10] (whereby a CMT determinedly looks at a problem from a number of different angles), or the Delphi Method[11] (a process of facilitated and iterative questioning of viewpoints). In crises where your organisation is pitted against an adversary (e.g., commercial, criminal, political or military), a version of Red Teaming[12] can be useful, where your options and plans are looked at from your rival's perspective. These three techniques are particularly useful if your team needs to challenge groupthink, individual or organisational biases and assumptions.

The important point about all these techniques is not which one you use – they are all useful – but that you understand and practise how to use a number of them at pace and under stress, and in a variety of situations.

We should emphasise again that crisis response is rarely if ever linear: it is iterative. This takes us back to the concept of the OODA loop, where the organisation that can re-evaluate and re-plan most effectively and rapidly will be the most successful.

Summary

Boards and top management need to be confident that they and their CMTs can make the right decisions under stress. Such confidence is not warranted without thorough and realistic preparation and training, with a focus on setting direction, generating options and making decisions in a variety of scenarios and differing scale and complexity. CMTs should identify models and techniques which suit their situation and master them so that they are justifiably sure that they can apply them successfully in any circumstances.

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[9] BS EN ISO 22361:2022, Security and resilience - Crisis management – Guidelines, Section 7: Strategic crisis decision-making, BSI Standards Ltd, 2022, p.25, clause 7.5c

[10] De Bono, E., Six Thinking Hats, Little, Brown and Company, 1985

[11] Dalkey, N. et al, An Experimental Application of the Delphi Method to the use of experts, Management Science, 9(3), Apr, 1963, pp458-467

[12] https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1027158/20210625-Red_Teaming_Handbook.pdf

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