


Crisis management competencies: A university stakeholder perspective

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Abstract

South African Universities faced an unforeseen crisis in the form of the #FeesMustFall (#FMF) movement. The Executive Management of the affected Universities was criticized for how the crisis was handled. Due to the significant cost (over R1 billion) to the higher education sector, not just in fiscal losses, but the loss of life, the investment into crisis management would be justified. Crisis management is a business action that includes planning and organising to prepare for and to respond to threats to business activities. Reviewing the literature identified a void regarding the crisis management competencies needed by the Executive Management as perceived by stakeholders. This exploratory study made use of a mixed methodology research design. A self-administered questionnaire incorporating open-ended questions was used to identify and explore the competencies perceived by the stakeholders as important during times of crisis. Simple descriptive statistics were used to identify the top management competencies needed in a time of crisis as perceived by the stakeholders. This was compared with the findings in the literature. The study identified 10 management competencies perceived by stakeholders of which eight competencies are consistent with crisis management competencies found in the literature.

KEYWORDS

crisis, crisis management competencies, management, university, #FeesMustFall, #management competencies

1 | INTRODUCTION

The #FeesMustFall (#FMF) movement turned South African universities into battlefields as valuable infrastructure was burned to the ground and academic functions was interrupted by rioting students who demanded free education, decolonisation of the higher education (HE) system and better working conditions for contract staff. The #FMF movement put a spotlight on the executive management of universities as executive

management teams of the affected universities were publicly criticized for how they dealt with the #FMF crisis which cost the HE sector more than R1 billion in damages across the various campuses.

Current crisis management competency research in HE focused on crisis management competencies as required skills for administrative leaders of HE (Holzweiss & Walker, 2018) and the lessons learned from crisis events (Hofer, et al., 2021; Jia Wang & Hutchins, 2010), also perceptions of crisis management teams of

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HE leaders in managing crisis situations (Slater, 2017). After a comprehensive search on Google Scholar, no compelling research was identified that focuses on identifying the important crisis management competencies needed by executive management members of South African universities during a crisis.

The study is based on an exploratory research design that used a mixed methodology by incorporating questionnaires to ascertain the perception of the stakeholders about the crisis management competencies portrayed by the executive management members during a crisis. This paper aims to identify the important crisis management competencies needed by executive management members of universities in South Africa during a time of crisis as perceived by the staff (stakeholder) of the university and compare the findings to crisis management competencies identified by Mikušová and Čopíková (2016).

2 | LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 | Competence, competency and competencies

What is competence? Or is it competency or competencies? The Cambridge Dictionary of Current English defines competency as 'an important skill that is needed to do a job' and competence as 'the ability to do something well' (Cambridge Dictionary, 2022). As much as the dictionary gives a clear view of the definition of competence and competency, confusion exists in academic literature and has been argued by various scholars over the years and has led to two unique approaches within the study of competencies. The two approaches are the US approach and the UK approach.

The term competency grew due to the managerial competencies research of McClelland and the McBer consultancy group in the United States of America in the 1970s (Bolden & Gosling, 2006) but an American Management Association study in the 1980s cemented the term competencies in behavioural and performance contexts. David McClelland published 'Testing for Competence rather than for Intelligence' in 1973. McClelland argued that traditional psychometrics such as IQ and aptitude tests were outdated and that personal competencies are more precise in predicting success in the workplace. (McClelland, 1973).

In the United Kingdom, the term competence especially in the management education setting was influenced by the works of Handy (1987) and Constable and McCormick (1987) which 'associated British's poor international economic performance to the country's lack of attention and formality in managerial education and development' Jamil (2015). Cheng et al. (2003) concluded that the UK approach is more focused on the performance requirements of job positions, rather than the jobholders.

For this article, competencies will be defined as: 'a set of observable and measurable attributes or success factors required for individuals for effective work performance' Wong (2020).

2.2 | Crisis management

The word crisis originated from the ancient Greek word 'krisis', which means judgement, choice or decision (Paraskevas, 2006). A general definition within the Business Dictionary (2017) defined a crisis as a serious occurrence that, if not handled suitably and appropriately or if not handled at all, may grow into a catastrophe or disaster. Bundy et al. (2017) identified four primary characteristics: (a) crises are sources of uncertainty, disruption and change; (b) crises are harmful or threatening for organisations and their stakeholders, many of whom may have conflicting needs and demands; (c) crises are behavioural phenomena, meaning that the literature has recognized that crises are socially constructed by the actors involved rather than a function of the depersonalized factors of an objective environment; and (d) crises are parts of larger processes, rather than discrete events.

Literature has given evidence that not all crises are the same. Some differ in scale from small to disastrous (Coombs, 1999) and in the manner they manifest. Coombs (2004) stated that a crisis type is a frame used to monitor clarifications of a situation. This frame contributes to focussing on different cues in a crisis to distinguish between different types of crises. Various researchers, for example, Mitroff and Alpaslan (2003), and Coombs (2004) have clustered and categorized the various crises and emphasized different aspects of the crisis.

Crises do not just affect people in general but also businesses or organisations. *An organisational crisis—an event perceived by managers and stakeholders as highly salient, unexpected, and potentially disruptive—can threaten an organisation's goals and have profound implications for its relationships with stakeholders.* (Bundy et al., 2017) Elliott et al. (2005) stated that due to the significant cost to the company in terms of financial losses, loss of life and missed market openings that could have led to competitive advantage the investment into crisis management would be justified. Herbane (2013) described crisis management as a business action that includes planning and organising to prepare for and to respond to threats that may hinder day-to-day business activities. Elliott et al. (2005) also state that the investment into crisis management would be justified by the significant cost to the company in terms of financial losses, loss of life and missed market openings that could have led to a competitive advantage.

2.3 | Crisis management competencies

Crisis management competencies often develop from competencies of a manager in general that are forcefully demanded just in times of crisis. (Mikušová & Čopíková, 2016) Herbane (2010) states, 'a person feels the threat of a crisis, they will react intuitively and deal with the crisis at hand'. Mikušová and Čopíková (2016) identified several critical competencies needed within the field of crisis management from the business owner's point of view. In their study, Mikusiva and Copikova state that crisis managers use a variety of competencies

which are clustered into three categories. The categories are; (1) managerial, (2) social and (3) functional. Mikušová and Čopíková (2016) also state that crisis managers often have no theoretical knowledge or practical experience within the field of crisis management and that the competencies are intuitively present. Mikušová and Čopíková (2016) specified that to manage a crisis efficiently, it is essential to have a systematized methodology based on intelligence, managing sensitivity, and a suitable understanding of the significance of a comprehensive plan and organisational willingness. Therefore, in a crisis and emergency, organisational leadership requires skills, individual and collective abilities, high self-confidence and in other words, specific competencies.

According to Mikušová and Čopíková (2016), the competencies of a crisis manager derive from the competencies of a general manager that are insistently requested just in time of crisis. Thus, the two researchers above believe that these competencies are learned through experiencing crises by managers and they learn how to deal with the crisis by experiencing the crisis first-hand.

Shrivastava et al. (2013) highlights that developing crisis management abilities and understanding a crisis has never been more significant. Szczepańska-Woszczyna (2013) stated that the effectiveness of management in times of crisis is determined by the managerial competencies of managers. Skorkova, et al. (2021) support the above statement and add that the manager's competencies of self-government organisations and establishments can guarantee their steady performance even during a crisis. Szczepańska-Woszczyna (2013) further adds that given the growth of a crisis, crisis management has become a vital skill of managers and the crisis a test of leadership skills and highlights that competency useful in the daily work of managers may be insufficient during the time of crisis. The creation of the capacity through human resources development by the organisation to manage the various crisis management activities was highlighted by Wooten and James (2008).

Herbane (2013) believed that a crisis manager must know the company and its environments, the possibilities and the resources at his disposal for the rescue of a company as well as its threats and opportunities. Mikušová and Čopíková (2016) supported this notion and added that a crisis manager will need to know the organisation's strengths and weaknesses together with the aspects mentioned by Herbane are the underlying requirements for the function of the crisis manager.

From the above, we can deduce that managers dealing with crisis events need specific management competencies. These competencies must be very specific. Through the years, numerous scholars and researchers have identified crisis management competencies needed by crisis managers. Some of the crisis management competencies overlap and others are specific due to the needs of the crisis. Some scholars were very specific and named competencies in fields like organisational management, financial management, and even conflict management, while others indicated competencies like the use of judgement, problem-solving and the use of collaboration. Table 1 presents Mikusiva and Copikova's (2016) crisis management groupings, where the researchers identified three different themes within

TABLE 1 Crisis management groupings.

Managerial competencies	Social competencies	Functional competencies
Time management	Communication	Production management
Coping with stress	Teamwork	Work organisation
Focus on human	Independence	Financial management
Focus on results	Focus on customer	Planning
Strategic thinking	Solidarity	Human management
Troubleshooting		Flexibility
Leadership		Creative thinking
		Focus on standards

Source: Mikušová and Čopíková (2016).

the crisis management competency grouping, which were managerial, social and functional competencies.

2.4 | Crisis management competencies in HE

No compelling literature was found that focuses on identifying crisis management competencies required by executive management in HE institutions in South Africa. Bush and Glover (2003) defined Management within HE as: 'the efficient and effective maintenance of an organisation's current activities and the implementation of policies'. Smith and Wolverton (2010) state that university leadership often have to balance the various competing interest of stakeholders like students, trustees, donors, government, and the community it serves. Various researchers have published research on Leadership within HEI, for example, Smith and Wolverton (2010), Van Ameijde et al., (2009), Bryman (2007), Spendlove (2007) and Eddy and Van DerLinden (2006), as well as leadership competencies, for instance, Spendlove (2007) and Smith (2007). However, Smith's HE Leadership Competency Model focused on HE Administrators and not the Executive Management structure of the University and Spendlove's research focused on the role Vice-Chancellor, Rector and Principal Officers play and the various competencies needed for effective leadership. This article will thus fill a void in current literature by identifying the crisis management competencies needed by Executive Management in times of crisis as perceived by stakeholders.

3 | THE METHODOLOGY

The study is based on an exploratory research design, which focuses on qualitative and quantitative research methodology. Exploratory research 'tends to tackle new problems on which little or no previous research has been done' (Brown, 2006). According to Burns and Bush (2010),

an exploratory research design is proper when the researchers have limited knowledge about the opportunity or issue and is not limited to one specific paradigm but may use either a qualitative or quantitative approach. This is ideal for this study, as the study produced quantitative and qualitative data.

The population of this study includes all staff members of a university within the Western Cape; which included academic, administrative/support staff, part-time and full-time who worked at the university during the #FMF crisis. The sample frame for this study was a list of academic, support and administrative employees who were affected by the #FMF crisis and who have at least 1 year's working experience with the university in question. The resolution was based on the belief that those employees with less than 1 year's working experience may not have experienced the #FMF crisis at the university and would not have experienced the university's management competencies at play during the crisis. The sample frame was provided by the Human Resources Department of the University and is deemed a reliable source. Making use of the Krejcie and Morgan (1970) formula and table, the sample size was established to be 326 staff members. The sample of 326 was selected from a population of 2149, in line with a high confidence level of 95% and a minimum sample error of 5%.

The study complied with the strict protocol prescribed by the chosen university and obtained the necessary approval needed to conduct the study. This process further ensured and guaranteed the safety and protection of the participants during the research process. The researcher developed a questionnaire to ascertain the perceived management competencies during a crisis. Before this research, no survey existed that measured the perceived management competencies during a crisis period. The data collection instrument was then piloted to provide the researcher with the opportunity to detect possible flaws in the measurement procedures, identify clear or unambiguously formulated items (Welman & Kruger, 2001) and rephrase questions to obtain better quality data from the respondents (Boynton, 2004). The pilot questionnaire was distributed to 12 randomly selected staff members of the university who met the research criteria. The questionnaire was e-mailed to the chosen staff members with a cover email, accompanied by a copy of the consent form, information sheet and official letter from the university permitting them to research the university. The staff members were requested to give feedback on the questionnaire especially asking whether the questions were understood, whether it was easy to complete and how long it took to complete the questionnaire.

Once the pilot stage of the research was concluded the feedback from the respondents was incorporated into the new questionnaire. The researcher received only 34 responses on the deadline day and submitted a second call to the staff on September 26, 2017 with a deadline set for October 13, 2017. After the second deadline the researcher only received a further 7 responses. The researcher explored the possible reasons for the low response rate and established that a major contributor to the low response rates was the fact that the target population was over-surveyed and the duration to complete the questionnaire. Weiner and Dalessio (2006)

stated that individuals and firms bombarded with questionnaires/surveys lead to survey fatigue and refusal to respond to non-essential questionnaires. During the period that the questionnaire was forwarded to the target staff, several research surveys were emailed to the staff at the University.

Taking the above into consideration, the researcher then opted to distribute the questionnaire in hard copy format in an attempt to increase the responses. Staff were then asked to complete the hard copy and drop the completed forms in drop boxes provided by November 3, 2017. This initiative delivered not only a total of 24 hard copies but also an increase in the online questionnaire which tallied 77 in total. Thus a total of 101 staff members completed the questionnaire but only 97 questionnaires were deemed viable. The qualitative data was analysed using analytical categories to explain and describe social occurrences (Pope, 2000). The data collected during the data collection phase will be read and reread to identify and identify patterns and groupings, which may centre on specific phrases, events, or types of behaviour. Furthermore, the quantitative data from the questionnaires were then analysed using simple descriptive statistics looking at frequencies and rank order scores and identifying the top management competencies needed in a time of crisis as perceived by the stakeholders.

4 | THE FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Of the 101 received questionnaires, only 97 were deemed viable and were analysed. The responses of the participants were further categorized into themes that correlate with the crisis management competencies. Table 2 presents the breakdown of the biographical information of the participants namely; gender, age, qualification, race and staff category. From the completed questionnaires, 40% of the respondents were male and 60% were female, 67% were administrative staff, 16.5% were support staff and 16.5% were the academic staff. All the respondents are employed full-time, while 85% are permanent and 15% are employed on contract. The majority of the respondents were coloured 68% and 17.5% were African/black. The bulk of the respondents have an honours degree (29%) 17.5% with Bachelor's degrees and 10.5% of the staff have a National Diploma, Master and Doctoral degree respectively.

Table 3 represents the findings of the study. The findings were collated based on the highest frequency for each rank in the top 10. The stakeholders identified the most important management competencies the management of a university must possess during a time of crisis. From the findings, eight management competencies identified by stakeholders are consistent with crisis management competencies identified in the literature Mikušová and Čopíková (2016).

Leadership was ranked as the top competency that management should possess during times of crisis. Smith and Wolverson (2010) state that university leadership often have to balance the various competing interest of stakeholders like students, trustees, donors, government, and the community it serves. The importance of

TABLE 2 Breakdown of biographical data.

Variable	Frequencies	Percentage
<i>Gender</i>		
Male	39	40%
Female	58	60%
Total	97	100%
<i>Age</i>		
21–30 years	11	11%
31–40 years	38	38%
41–50 years	24	24%
51–60 years	20	20%
60 years and above	4	4%
Total	97	100.0
<i>Qualification</i>		
Grade 11	3	3%
Grade 12	13	13.4%
National certificate	4	4%
National diploma	10	10.3%
Bachelor degree	17	17.5%
Honours degree	28	29%
Master's degree	10	10.3%
Doctoral degree	10	10.3%
Postgraduate diploma	1	1%
Other: professional degrees	1	1%
Total	97	100.0
<i>Race</i>		
Black	17	17.5%
Coloured	66	68%
Asian	4	4%
White	6	6%
Foreigner	3	3%
Other	1	1%
Total	97	100.0
<i>Staff category</i>		
Academic staff	16	16.5%
Administrative Staff	65	67%
Support Staff	16	16.5%
Total	97	100.0

Source: Own processing.

leadership during a crisis is another well-documented topic by authors such as Mikušová and Čopíková (2016) Van Wart and Kapucu (2011) and Wooten and James (2008). Wooten and James (2004) further added that crisis leadership is also about managing the crisis

in such a manner that the organisation is in a better position after the crisis. The research by the previous authors just cements the importance of leadership or leadership competencies during a crisis. Furthermore, the verbatim responses from the participants further motivate leadership competencies during a crisis as seen in Table 3.

Problem solver was listed as the second most important management competency to portray during a time of crisis by the stakeholders as the urgency of correcting the crisis and solving whatever is needed to rectify the situation is vital. Mikušová and Čopíková (2016) stated that problem-solving and leadership skills are critical when coping and dealing with a crisis. The participants listed safety consciousness as the 3rd most important crisis management competency. This is due to the violent nature of the #FMF student protests and the staff's concerns about their safety on campuses that are impacted by the student protest. This notion is supported by the verbatim responses from the respondents that highlight their safety concerns. The safety concern is one of two crisis management competencies not consistent with the crisis competencies listed by Mikušová and Čopíková (2016). Communication is a vital competency during a crisis, this is evident from the research by Coombs (2018), Mikušová and Čopíková (2016), Wooten and James (2008) and Caponigro (2000). The verbatim responses from the respondents emphasize the importance of communication, especially during a rapid change event like a crisis. Mikusova and Copikova further stated that communication is a key part of a reactive crisis strategy. Integrity is number 5 on the list and the second crisis competency is not consistent with those identified by Mikušová and Čopíková (2016). The respondents indicated that integrity together morals and ethics play a big part when leading during a crisis. The respondents further indicated that staff needed to trust management during a crisis. This is consistent with the research of Mitroff et al. (1989) who indicated that trustworthiness is an important value for a crisis manager. The respondents have indicated through their responses that being purposeful during a crisis is a top crisis management competency. The respondents indicated that working towards common goals and focusing on completing those goals is vital during a crisis. This competency can be grouped with crisis competency number 8 (customer focus) and 9 (results-oriented) which focus on specific goals during the crisis. According to Mikušová and Čopíková (2016), focusing on results is a managerial aspect of crisis management and focusing on customers is a social aspect of crisis management, but both are important and these competencies have been highlighted by the respondents.

Next on the list, at number 7, is the ability to be flexible or adaptable during a time of crisis. Researchers like Mikušová and Čopíková (2016) and Van Wart and Kapucu (2011) have emphasized the importance of flexibility during a crisis as a must-have competency as managers need to be flexible or adapt to solve rapidly changing crisis events. Finally, number 10 on the list is the ability to manage time. Since time is such a valuable commodity during a crisis, the ability to manage the limited time at hand is a vital crisis management competency. The respondents highlight this importance by stating that 'Management must know that every

TABLE 3 Top 10 Crisis management competencies as perceived by stakeholders.

Rank	Findings	Responses
1	Leadership skills ^a	'Management must deploy leadership skills during times of crisis' 'Crisis times call for strong leaders to lead and manage crises accordingly' 'Staff look to leaders during crisis times, these leadership skills are vital'
2	Problem solver ^a	'Must be able to solve problems and avoid future problems' 'Management must work actively to solve any problems' 'Management must be engaged or skilled at solving problems'
3	Safety conscious ^b	'Safety of staff is very important during #FMF' 'During times of conflict staff and students have confidence that decisions would have taken into account safety and therefore supports decision with confidence' 'The safety of both staff and clients have to be protected'
4	Good communicator ^a	'During FMF incidents, management need to communicate effectively' 'Communication the most important skill required to solve a crisis' 'Management should communicate with all stakeholders involved in #FMF to avoid protest actions as best as possible'
5	Integrity ^b	'Management must work within morals and ethical grounds' 'Having high standards and morals is vital during the crisis' 'Must be able to trust management and by having integrity means that staff can trust in management, especially during a crisis'
6	Purposeful ^a	'Working with a common goal is key to managing through a crisis' 'Working towards specific goals during a crisis is vital' 'Focus on wins and outcomes and not waste time'
7	Flexible/adaptable ^a	'Be able to work under different circumstances and not panic' 'Management must be flexible and adaptable during the time of crisis' 'Flexibility allows the business to adopt new strategies during the crisis'
8	Customer focus ^a	'Consider the impact of decisions/situations on students, both protesting and non-protesting' 'A happy customer/unhappy customer will give you accurate thoughts on products' 'Management must be focused on meeting the needs of customers'
9	Results-oriented ^a	'Management must be results-oriented to find solutions to crisis' 'Management must be focussed on positive results' 'Must strive to complete goals and communicate results to stakeholders'
10	Time manager ^a	'Response time during a crisis period is vital' and 'Management must know that every second counts' 'Time is also critical a factor as it ensures that the whole supply chain is efficient' 'Time managed properly will result in more work produced, no time wasting'

^aConsistent with competencies identified in the literature.

^bNot similar to competencies identified the in literature.

Source: Own processing.

second counts'. This notion is highlighted by Vardarlier (2016) who stated that a notion that should be considered during a crisis, is time management. Vardarlier (2016) further added that managing time competently during a crisis is crucial.

Two management competencies were not consistent with the crisis management competencies identified by the literature. The

possible reason for the differentiation could be the fact that the crisis management competencies which were used to compare the crisis management competencies identified by the respondents are focused on SMEs and from the viewpoint of SME owners. The two management competencies are safety consciousness and integrity which have been identified by the stakeholders as important and can

be viewed as important from a HE viewpoint especially taking into consideration the violent nature of the #FMF protests (Maphasa, 2017) and the fact that those involved during times of crises need to rely on management being consequent in their decision making to build trust. Bryman (2007) mentioned that this aspect of leader behaviour indicates the need for leaders to be trusted and to be seen as 'people of integrity'. This statement is supported by leadership literature (e.g., Posner & Kouzes, 1993 cited in Bryman, 2007) who stated that integrity and trust were found to be vital in a research study of perceptions of what makes for effectiveness in heads of departments in the United States of America.

5 | SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

This exploratory study attempted to identify and compare the management competencies perceived by stakeholders as important or essential during a time of crisis with crisis management competencies found in the literature. This aim was achieved. Ten management competencies were identified that is, leadership, problem solver, safety-conscious, good communication, integrity, purposeful, flexible/adaptable, customer focus, results-oriented and time manager. Eight of the management competencies found in this study are consistent with the literature. Safety consciousness and integrity as competencies identified by stakeholders are not consistent with the literature. These two competencies are important as they could be considered to be directly related to the crisis in HE as perceived by the participants in this study.

This study provided a rare insight into the view of the stakeholder, who experienced a crisis first-hand and their perception of the management decision during the crisis. Furthermore, the study provided a list consisting of the top 10 crisis management competencies as perceived by stakeholders which can be used as a guideline by the human resources department of universities when compiling the competencies of executive management members. A limitation of this research included the fact that the number of respondents was relatively small. The researcher recommends further studies on the topic especially since the whole South African Tertiary Education Sector was affected by the #FMF crises.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Due to the nature of the Research and ethical reasons, the data supporting this research is not available as participants of the study did not give written consent for their data to be shared publicly.

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