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Research Report

In demand during a crisis: Advising well in exceptional circumstances

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IRS DIALOG



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Policy Paper

Oliver Ibert, Tjorven Harmsen, Verena Brinks (JGU Mainz)

In Demand During a Crisis: Advising Well in Exceptional Circumstances



Leibniz Institute for
Research on Society and Space

In demand during a crisis: Advising well in exceptional circumstances

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Executive Summary: For readers short on time

Handling crises means, above all, having to make decisions under conditions of existential threat, fundamental uncertainty, and great urgency. Modern crises transgress territorial and disciplinary boundaries, administrative departments, and economic sectors, as well as the boundaries between culture and nature. Elected officials are thus ever more frequently confronted with the limitations of their own knowledge. External expertise can therefore be of assistance in making well-informed decisions before, during, and following a crisis. Dealing with crises is no longer only about averting urgent threats, but also about reflection upon them and, ideally, making changes to prevent their recurrence. It is here that experts can also make their contribution. Where one succeeds in coming out of a crisis stronger than before, one can speak of **resilient crisis management**.

Unfortunately, there is barely any knowledge about the particularities of crisis consultancy. The following recommendations are intended to prepare experts to act adequately in such exceptional situations. They can serve during times of non-crisis as preparation for tasks ahead or be used for quick orientation when a crisis arises.

Four characteristics of crises are emphasised in crisis-management literature, about which there is broad consensus: **threat**, **uncertainty**, **urgency**, and **contingency**. Crises are socially constructed, which is to say that they cannot be determined by means of objective criteria or threshold values. What can most probably be objectively established, however, is the broadly shared perception of a situation as one of crisis. In this case, not only the discourse, but also the context for action is altered.

The course of a crisis is divided into **three phases**. The acute phase, during which the events concerned come thick and fast, is framed by phases before (pre-crisis) and after (post-crisis). The three phases do not correspond directly to the experience of crises – which are usually perceived as occurring quite abruptly by those involved – and are only apparent with hindsight.

Counted as **experts** are people who have acquired both a reputation within a domain of knowledge and long-term practical experience. Expert status is not an individual quality but presents itself as a position within a network of relationships: (1) in the relationship between consultant and decision maker and (2) through prominent positioning within a knowledge domain. Within these recommendations we distinguish between experts *in* crises and experts *for* crises. In the first case, the knowledge domain is itself affected by the crisis, while in the second case it is the subject matter of the domain. These recommendations are especially intended for experts *in* crises and are intended to help them – and *you*, our respective readers – to better understand crises and to navigate the pressing circumstances in which advice will be provided.

Providing good advice in the pre-crisis phase

In times of non-crisis, you can assume that the fields of practice you provide advice to are in fact in a phase of pre-crisis. This will alter your perspective on things.

- **Recognise weak signals:** Take notice of weak warning signals that have possibly gone unrecognised by your clients. Scrutinise the assumptions widely shared by insiders.
- **Prepare for crises:** Analyse how well prepared for a crisis your clients are.
- **Perceive crisis interests:** Register escalating forces in the field of practice that have an interest in an intensification of crises.
- **Shape media activities:** Intervene in public debate when diagnoses of a crisis are circulating. You might be able to influence these diagnoses and the way in which the crisis is framed.
- **Reflect upon your own resistance to crisis:** Examine your own behavioural patterns in a crisis.
- **Reflect upon your own position within the knowledge domain:** Evaluate how controversial or widely shared your position is within the knowledge domain.

Providing good advice in the acute crisis phase

Acute crises are dynamically unfolding situations characterised by incomplete information and an escalation of events. Those involved experience a crisis as a massive source of stress and seek to place themselves “ahead of the curve”.

- **Organise roles, clarify the task:** Clarify at the earliest opportunity who among those involved is your client, and what exactly your task consists of.
- **Acknowledge stress among all those involved:** Emotional stress can bring otherwise-hidden character traits to the surface and limit abilities. Do not take either of these “personally”, and instead ascribe it to the crisis situation.
- **Communicating the crisis – internally:** Despite the time pressure, form your own picture of the situation. Make sure that there is no confusion between the situation itself and how it is being understood. Present the facts as clearly as possible. Recognise the potential for misunderstandings and make sure to avoid them, for instance by repeating back in your own words what you have understood from others.
- **Communicating the crisis – externally:** Help to carry the strategic goals of crisis communication out into the environment but keep a low profile in public debates.
- **Regulate yourself:** Pay attention to maintaining a calm, business-like demeanour. This can

radiate out to other participants.

- **Be prepared to make quasi-decisions:** In the midst of a crisis, your advice could tip the scales. Have the courage to give advice all the same, even if a quasi-decision is looming. Make sure that the advice has been correctly understood and accompany the implementation of the resulting decision.
- **Review your professional distance:** Take care to maintain your professional distance. Put aside matters of your personal opinion, even if there is a relationship of trust between you and your client.
- **Prepare to reflect:** Keep the advice you give during the crisis well documented.
- **Remain anchored in the domain:** Concentrate on scientifically based, widely shared findings and validated evidence.
- **Frame uncertainty:** Have the confidence to share sufficiently certain findings and communicate whatever uncertainty remains.

Providing good advice in the post-crisis phase

The abatement of the acute phase of a crisis offers an opportunity for understanding and learning.

- **Frame crises as symptoms:** Understand the crisis as a symptom of more fundamental problems. Focus on endogenous factors that can be shaped. Avoid apportioning personal blame.
- **Instigate robust crisis structures:** Support arrangements for the next crisis, such as the creation of a permanent crisis team or the development of a crisis manual.
- **Reintroduce complexity:** Gradually bring important aspects of the consulting process that were too complex to be dealt with during the acute crisis phase back into the frame.
- **Understand the post-crisis phase as a one-off opportunity for consultation:** Set aside a short recovery period before proactively initiating the reappraisal of the crisis. Pay attention to experts while the field remains open – the opportunity can pass quickly.
- **Evaluate your crisis experience:** Following a cooling-off period, analyse your experience of the crisis. Consider the possible co-responsibility of your own knowledge domain during the crisis.
- **Develop contacts:** Use the contacts made during the crisis to experts from other domains and push for long-term interdisciplinary exchange.

1. Introduction: Providing advice during crises

Crises have become a ubiquitous aspect of the world today. Brexit, refugee migration, the consequences of climate change, and the coronavirus pandemic are only the most obvious examples of complex and acute situations in which diverse organisations and political institutions see themselves forced to react. Decisions must be made under conditions of existential threat, fundamental uncertainty, and great urgency: that is, under crisis conditions. Crises rarely observe humanly created boundaries, but transgress territorial borders, the division of knowledge into various disciplines, the arrangement of administrative departments or the politics of concrete locations, the organisation of the economy into sectors, or the fine line between culture and nature. Crisis researcher Arjen Boin thus speaks of “transboundary crises”.

Leaders and elected representatives are ever more frequently confronted with the limitations of their own knowledge. One way out of this is to draw upon external expertise to gain access to the necessary specialist knowledge. Experts can – so it is hoped – support the responsible management personnel to make well-informed decisions before, during, and following a crisis.

Crises mark a turning point – a situation in which people prevent a further escalation of the situation through courageous action. They are without question threatening, but their outcomes are nevertheless open- A crisis thus always offers an opportunity of some kind. Attached to this open-ended aspect of crises is the additional expectations of the work of experts during crisis periods. Their guiding contribution is not only crucial for coming out of the crisis mode as swiftly as is feasible, but – possibly even more importantly – also to emerge from the crisis strengthened and to use the occasion to tackle more deep-seated problems.

Unfortunately, very little is yet known about the particularities of scientific consultation under crisis conditions. What are the specific characteristics of crisis situations and what effect do these have on the quality of advice given? What are the challenges that advisory experts face and how can these be used to help learn something about the experience of crises?

These recommendations are addressed to scientific experts who have both acquired in-depth knowledge of one subject area and made effective use of their specialist knowledge in practice. The recommendations relate to the particular context of providing counsel during crises. In our view, an understanding of these particularities are important if one is to successfully provide advice in a crisis. It is worth pointing out the differences between routine counseling contexts and those that occur during crises. The recommendations are therefore intended to provide a fund of general knowledge about crises.

These recommendations summarise useful findings on scientific consulting in crises to prepare experts to act adequately in such exceptional circumstances. They comprise a theoretical section that compactly outlines what is worth knowing in a crisis and a practical section with concrete recommendations for action for scientific consultation in times of crisis. The recommendations can be used in times of non-crisis to prepare for situations that may then not arise. They are also suitable for providing quick orientation in the event of an actual. The following pages thus provide the tools to fathom what experts can do in crisis situations and what challenges are associated with consulting during crises.

The RESKIU research project

These recommendations are based upon the results of the BMBF-financed research project *Coping With Crises in a Resilient Manner: The Role of Expert Advice in the Creation and Use of 'Opportunities' in Crisis Situations (RESKIU)*, conducted from 2017 to 2021 at the Leibniz Institute for Research of Society and Space (IRS). On the basis of three examples of crisis from the fields of economics, politics, and the environment, the project team investigated what contribution experts can make to overcome crises. More information on the project can be found [here](#).



Image: Gajus@shutterstock.com

I. Theoretical section: What you should know about crises

2. Crisis – what crisis?

2.1 General characteristics of crises

A crisis can be understood as a situation of severe social danger. Central values or structures are threatened, and a response is made essential. To those affected – whether individuals, organisations, or society as a whole – it is immediately clear that urgent action is required. To wait or to behave “as before” would inevitably exacerbate the situation. At the same time, fundamental uncertainty about how to react prevails. Those affected depend on support and in a crisis a wide variety of stakeholders are very soon actively involved. The situation can be improved through swift action – but it could also be made worse. Crises therefore bring both risks and opportunities, which makes them (in hindsight) turning points. How things develop is determined within a complex network of interacting participants, as well as the unique dynamic of the situation.



Four characteristics of a crisis

The concept of crisis is applied differently in various contexts and subject disciplines. In crisis-management literature, four characteristics of crises are emphasised for which there is broad consensus: **threat**, **uncertainty**, **urgency**, and **contingency**.

Image: gr8effect/pixabay.com

In principle, it is not possible to unequivocally determine crises on the basis of objectively measurable indicators. One must work instead on the principle that crises are socially constructed or, in the words of political scientist Nicole Deitelhoff: “A crisis exists when someone says there is one and many others believe them”. This is also what makes it so difficult to anticipate their emergence. The threshold that must be crossed only indirectly correlates with measurable conditions in the organisations, labour markets, and ecological and political systems concerned. Much more important are thresholds of media attention and of collective opinion formation. The socially constructed character of a crisis does not mean that it is merely imagined, though, nor that it is not based on “real” problems. On the contrary: a crisis diagnosis always relates back to measurable problems. These measurable problems do not, however, lead automatically to a crisis.



CASE EXAMPLE

Shrove Monday, 24 February 2020: Corona – a dangerous infectious disease, but not yet a crisis

The first case of a SARS-CoV-2 infection in Germany was verified on 28 January 2020. At this time, the name “COVID-19” had not yet been established. By 12 February 2020, a total of 14 infections had been confirmed in Germany. While the Shrove Monday procession could still take place on 24 February 2020, in the course of the week the general perception of the crisis changed. The German broadcaster ZDF, for example, broadcast a special programme on 28 February 2020 on the coronavirus. The situation was increasingly perceived as threatening and its dominance in media coverage intensified.

Images: own photo of the Shrove Monday procession, Mainz, 24.2.2020; right: geralt/pixabay.com



The context for action is crucially altered if a crisis is diagnosed and this diagnosis is shared. The diagnosis generates a sense of threat, uncertainty, and urgency from which those involved are unable to escape. Any attempt to ignore a diagnosis of crisis or to simply continue one's normal routine will compound the situation and pay a high political, economic, and possibly personal price. If those responsible refuse to prioritise a crisis, then the crisis will find a way to prioritise itself – and not without causing considerable additional damage that can literally cost those in positions of responsibility their jobs.

CASE EXAMPLE

When there's a crisis, there's a crisis – whether you want one or not

An explosion on the drilling rig Deepwater Horizon in 2010 resulted in an oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico. The Board of Directors of the company concerned at first attempted to play down the damage caused, while awareness of the crisis increased among the general public. The company wanted to return to business-as-usual as soon as possible, leading to even greater public indignation – with the consequence that its CEO was ultimately forced to resign.



Bild: 12019/pixabay.com

In addition, the boundaries of crises are often unclear. What is the subject of the crisis, who is affected, who is responsible, when did it begin, and where is it occurring? All these questions will be negotiated again and again in the course of a crisis, and it is thus only in hindsight that crises can be described as a unified, linear, or even causal result of events and decisions. The direct experience of crises, by contrast, is characterised by opacity, diffuseness, and “chaos”. The reason for this is that,

during a crisis, one can no longer resort to familiar contexts and the escalating events are initially hard to gain an overview of. Different people affected by a crisis will experience the situation from their own unique and limited perspective as highly dynamic and full of unanticipated changes. It is therefore worth taking a look at the temporal and spatial nature of crises.

2.2 The temporality of crises, or: After the crisis is before the crisis

Literature on the subject often divides the unfolding of crises into three phases. The direct experience of a crisis is a dramatic, acute phase in which events occur thick and fast. This phase is framed by others before (the pre-crisis phase) and after (the post-crisis phase), both of which are distinguished by their calmer chronological progress. Experienced crisis managers know about these three crisis phases and do not represent them as linear, following time's arrow, but rather as a circular, continually repeating sequence (see figure, below). From this perspective, out of the phase that follows one crisis there sooner or later emerges another that precedes the next.

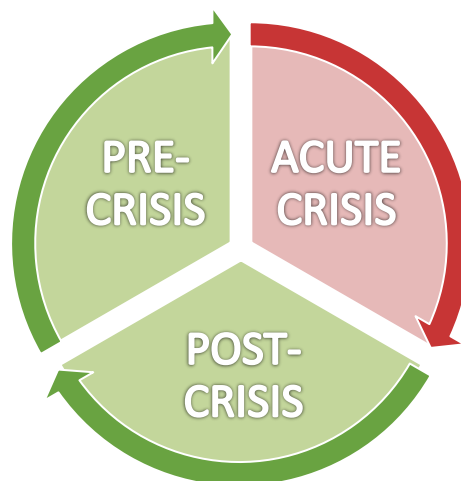


Figure „**There is always a crisis**“:
The three-phase cycle of crises (own image)

These three phases can only be differentiated as clearly as they are presented in handbooks on crisis management in retrospect, following the experience of a crisis that has been overcome. The distinctions do not initially apply during direct confrontation with crises. Before an escalating dynamic establishes itself, those affected are generally not aware that they are about to find themselves in a crisis situation. They are blind to the possibility of a critical escalation and are mostly focused on their routine business. The end of a crisis follows patterns that are similarly constructed to those present at its outbreak. Like the situation following a severe earthquake, as a crisis abates and the situation begins to calm, there remains residual uncertainty whether the crisis has actually ended or is experiencing a temporary lull. This residual uncertainty can only be allayed through socially attributed acts that declare a crisis over.

CASE EXAMPLE

The end of the crisis: A socially constructed act amid persistent residual uncertainty

Following the discharge of the last COVID-19 patient from hospital, and with no new COVID-19 cases having been diagnosed for 17 consecutive days, a visibly relieved Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern declared the end of the pandemic in New Zealand on 8 June 2020. This was accompanied by the lifting of all restrictions on public life (although entry restrictions remained in force). Barely two weeks later, however, three new cases of infection emerged from people who had already entered New Zealand at the beginning of June.

Images: geralt & Clker-Free-Vector-Images/pixabay.com

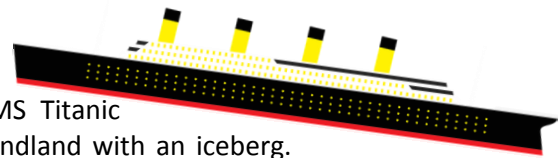


Crises are experienced twice by those affected by them. During the first experience, those involved are thrown into a tumultuous series of events; they subsequently experience it in retrospect as a reconstruction, ideally feeling that the crisis has been overcome. It is not until this second round that the acute phase can be framed by a “before” and “after”. During the reconstruction of the pre-crisis phase, the focus is often on the warning signals that were overlooked, or errors in decisions taken that led to an escalation in the situation. In the post-crisis phase the causes of the crisis are processed, conclusions are drawn, and learning outcomes are recorded. How thoroughly these reflections are carried out is at the discretion of those involved. It is therefore more accurate to say that reprocessing and learning *should* be a part of the post-crisis phase.

2.3 The spatiality of crises, or: Everything is a matter of perspective

Crises are experienced by everyone differently, because they are undergone from a variety of positions. “Positions” is here meant in a figurative sense – as involved parties, decision makers, consultants, rescue workers, to name but a few. On the other hand, “positions” can be understood in the geographical sense as a location in space with all its possibilities and limitations. In a shipping accident, it makes a great difference whether the perspective is that of the captain of the ship that is ablaze, of a crew member on a rescue helicopter, of a ship owner working from their office, or of an insurance agent working from home.

CASE EXAMPLE

Why the Titanic sank a thousand times

On 14 April 1912, shortly before midnight, the RMS Titanic collided around 300 nautical miles south of Newfoundland with an iceberg.

The largest and most luxurious ship in the world at the time sank within 2 hours and 40 minutes. Of the approximately 2,200 people on board, 1,514 perished. The course of events has been reconstructed many times over, including in the context of international maritime shipping reforms. Owing to reconstructions of this kind, we are accustomed to analysing such catastrophes from the perspective of an objective observer. But the many people involved experienced many different catastrophes.

This multi-perspectivity of the events was even made use of in James Cameron's Hollywood blockbuster of 1997. By following the film's two chief protagonists, the audience are able to view a number of local trouble spots. Engineers watch as the protective bulkheads close, trapping them deep within the ship and leaving them at the mercy of the penetrating water. Third-class passengers are prevented by crush barriers from reaching the deck and securing a place on the rescue boat. On the bridge, the inevitability of the sinking slowly dawns upon the captain. The ship's designer, also on board, seeks feverishly through the construction plans for a way to prevent the sinking. The radio operator tries in vain to transmit distress calls to nearby ships. The band performs its repertoire with the aim of reducing the panic on board. This example is a simple illustration of the many facets, perspectives, and positions from which crises are variously experienced.

Image: muhnaufals/pixabay.com

The spatial perspective can lead to a deeper understanding of the consequences of crises and what responsibilities must be exercised in order to resolve them. There are many people involved in crises and from any individual perspective it is difficult to view the high level of social complexity that comes with them. This leads to uncertainty and sometimes even to conflicts around responsibilities. In crises it is often unclear who has decision-making powers. Part of any crisis process is the clarification of responsibilities, for instance whether they are to be handled nationally or supranationally, or in the case of Germany at the municipal, state, or federal level.

CASE EXAMPLE

Coordinated response? Jurisdiction during the coronavirus crisis

From early 2020 onwards, the novel coronavirus SARS-CoV-2 spread rapidly. Although the World Health Organization (WHO) underscored the global dimension of the problem when it classified the viral spread as a “pandemic”, and thus laid the foundations for an internationally coordinated approach, the crisis was responded to very differently at the national level, often in the form of border closures. A level of action was thus brought to the fore that did not meet the requirements of the geography of the crisis.

In Germany, too, a unified response was not initially possible. As a result of the – in many respects advantageous – federal structure, decision-making powers were decentralised. Cancellation of events or school closures, for instance, could not be handled centrally by the Federal Minister of Health. Federal states, districts, and cities largely determined their own crisis responses. The result was a much-criticised “patchwork” of territorial rules.



Images: geralt & panos13121/pixabay.com

3. Crisis as opportunity? Crisis management and resilience

It is only through courageous action that one can stave off a crisis and actively shape its open-ended character. The threatening nature of the situation and the loss of routine can become occasions for serious and unsparing stocktaking that can uncover underlying structural problems. The urgency of the crisis situation, together with its fundamental uncertainty, compel one to improvise and to consider adapted and unfamiliar kinds of response. Many of the resulting solutions bring with them the possibility of improvements that go beyond the crisis itself. As a provisional adaptation model, crisis management is very effective, but should be expanded to include resilient forms of crisis management. This shifts the focus from pure coping to working on the causes of crises.

Resilience is reflected in various processes. Even during the acute, chaotic crisis phase, it is important to recognise inappropriate patterns of action as such and to relinquish them as part of a radical acceptance of the new situation. Experienced crisis managers are able to establish new priorities swiftly and, in doing so, alleviate the stress cycles that result from the dynamic of superfluous action. Another process that promotes resilience can be found in those involved forming an accurate and flexible picture of the situation. In addition to the emergency at the centre of the crisis, experienced personnel also consider themselves and others affected as integral parts of the situation. Based on how the crisis is understood, they approach the actual situation through improvised actions. Incrementally and in cooperation with others, they then plan, implement, and evaluate the effectiveness of their actions and are thus able to adapt to the situation in an extremely agile way. If this works, they finally manage to get “ahead of the curve”, that is, to regain control over the situation.

CASE EXAMPLE

The view of the situation is not the situation itself

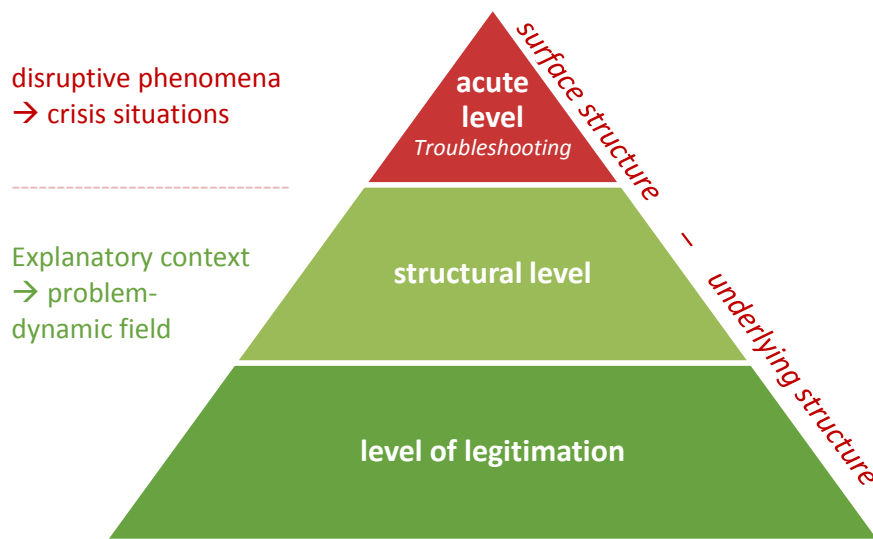
A ferry with numerous passengers on board suffered an accident on the high seas. To gain a view of the situation, rescue forces initially made use of the official list of passengers. The accident had led to people having to enter lifeboats, which then floated around haphazardly in the water at night. A part of the rescue operation was thus to bring the passengers to safety on a secure vessel. Had the number of listed passengers been used as the basis for the operation, the officer in charge might have ended the search as soon as this number of passengers was rescued. Experienced crisis managers know, however, that starting assumptions determine the actions taken. In human rescue missions it can be fatal to rely on numbers from passenger lists. In this particular case, in fact, there were dozens more in the lifeboats than had been officially accounted for.

Image: mmi9/pixabay.com

Such a way of dealing with crises, characterised by close contextual observation, feedback, purposefulness, and agility, must be consciously reflected upon during the post-crisis phase. Only in this way can one draw conclusions for everyday life. The more explicitly the crisis is understood as a symptom of a deeper problem of structure or legitimacy, the more comprehensive these conclusions will be.

An understanding of crises as disruptive events embedded in a field of larger problem dynamics can be helpful here (see figure below). Volker Perthes, an expert on international conflict, uses the metaphor of “crisis landscapes” to emphasise that crises should not only be understood as isolated events, but are interconnected with long-term developments and structural contexts. Coping strategies always have an effect on both the crisis and the field affected by it. Resilient crisis management means getting to the bottom of the matter, at latest by the time the “troubleshooting” is over. The challenge is not to be content with a return to normality – as longed for as this might be – but to actively confront uncomfortable questions and tasks during calmer phases.

Figure „*Crisis in context*“
(own image)



People and organisations who have to deal with crises on a regular basis, and who therefore anticipate further crises, will sum up the “lessons learned” after each experience. They also strive to incrementally reflect upon their routine actions through close observation of their environment. They integrate self-learning loops that they use to question themselves, address gaps in knowledge, and consciously keep themselves flexible. A high capacity for resilience is based on mindfulness in everyday life, too.

4. Who is an expert in a crisis?

In globally interconnected societies, crises transgress many humanly defined boundaries. Disruption to ecological systems has an impact on social systems. Crises traverse corporate boundaries and spread from one economic sector to another. The more pronounced the boundary-crossing character of a crisis, the more organisations are pushed to the limits of their capabilities. To cope with the complexity and dynamic of the crisis, they must bring together highly specialised expertise. In other words, they have an increased need for external, often scientifically based, advice.

4.1 Consulting as an asymmetrical relationship

Experts are people who have acquired a reputation in a domain of knowledge and who represent this domain. Alongside formal qualifications they have long-term practical experience. Their status is not an individual quality but rather a particular position. On the one hand, consultation always exists in a

relationship whose prerequisite is a demand for advice. On the other hand, experts represent a knowledge domain that, in the case of consulting, concerns one or more fields of practice (for more details, see Section 4.2). The consulting relationship and its various dimensions are summarised in the figure below, and its individual elements will be taken up in the second, practically focused section (Part II, below).

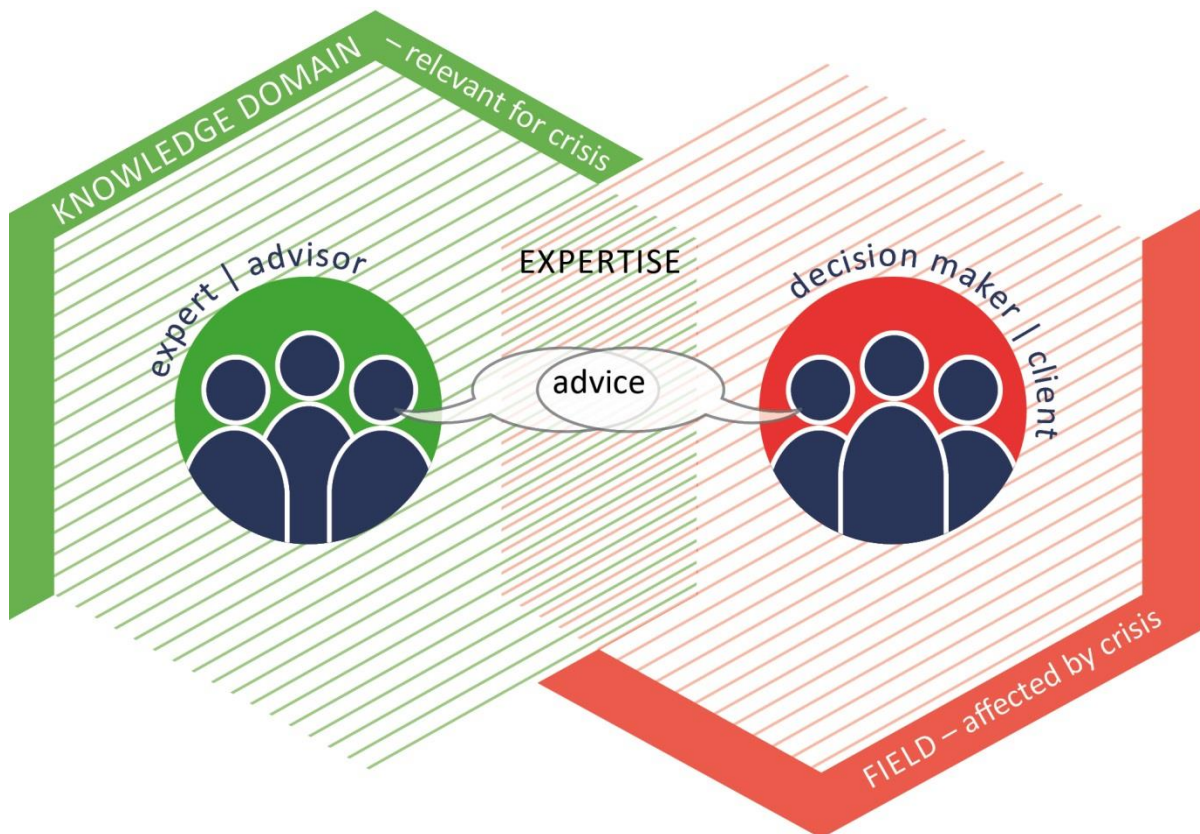


Figure „**The consulting relationship during a crisis**“
(own image, graphic realisation by Henrika Prochnow, IRS Erkner)

Experts become consultants the moment their expertise is in demand, usually from decision makers. Being a consultant is thus not a state that one is in permanently, but rather one that is a situative constellation generated by demand. In the course of time, however, a social relationship often forms in which accumulated personal trust prevails.

The relationship is characterised by its asymmetry, which mainly arises from the fact that decision makers have a mandate and legitimacy to choose a course of action, whereas consultants can influence decisions only indirectly, for instance by providing knowledge or contributing to an assessment of the consequences of decisions. Part of this asymmetry also relates to issues of liability. Consultants are not usually held responsible for their decisions, but experts can be held morally

responsible and suffer damage to their reputation or be the target of personal hostility in public debate.

4.2 The basis of expertise in knowledge domains and fields of practise

A consulting relationship exists between two people, but it is not only a case of two different personalities encountering one another. Instead, it is one of different perspectives, expectations, organisational affiliations, routines, and practices.

The experts to whom these recommendations relate generally have formal, often academic qualifications as well as professional experience extending over a number of years. Their status is based upon their position and recognition from peers within their field. They are not usually asked to provide personal advice, but rather because they enjoy a “good reputation” within their domain. Consultants therefore do not only speak for themselves, but rather for their whole domain.

Not all knowledge domains are of relevance to decision makers. On the contrary, most domains are of little interest to them. What is crucial for consulting is the significance a knowledge domain has for each field of practice during a crisis. Just as consultants possess status within their knowledge domains, decision makers have their place defined by their position and competence within a field of practice.

4.3 Types of expertise in crises

One can roughly distinguish two kinds of expertise in a crisis. On the one hand, there are experts whose profession is in crisis management per se. We call these experts *for* crises. Experts *for* crises have at their disposal a clear understanding of how crises develop and can apply techniques to overcome them. Owing to their general knowledge of process dynamics common to all crises, they are often called upon to provide support to people with decision-making responsibilities. On the other hand, there are experts *in* crises with specialist knowledge of one domain important for a deeper understanding of the system affected by the crisis in question. Experts *in* crises may have long-term consulting experience but are usually not versed in how to manage the particular challenges that an acute crisis involves.



Two types of expertise

- Experts *for* crises with generic processual knowledge of crises
- Experts *in* crises with specialist knowledge relevant to particular crises

Image: gr8effect/pixabay.com

While there is an analytical distinction between experts *for* and *in* crises, in practice it is possible for both types of expertise to meet in one person. These recommendations are particularly intended for experts *in* crises. They – and *you*, our respective readers – will be directly addressed in the following.

II. Practical section: How to strengthen your consulting capabilities before, during, and after a crisis

As an expert, you can envision the course of a crisis to comprise three phases (see figure, [here](#)). Understanding crises as processes with recognisable qualities offers orientation for your service as an advisor during the course of a particular crisis. You can ask yourself, for instance: Where in the crisis process am I currently? What has already happened? And, above all, what is still highly likely to happen? You can adapt your course of action accordingly.

In addition, it can make sense to bring to mind the various dimensions of consulting (see figure, [here](#)). The client who requests your services as a consultant represents one dimension. A second dimension is presented by the field of practice within which you are offering advice. Within this are located media with which you will possibly be confronted. Thirdly, as a consultant you should also scrutinise yourself as a person in various phases of crisis. Finally, there is the knowledge domain that forms the source of your status as an expert. These four dimensions of consulting practice should not be thought of as independent. Their distinction is principally an analytical one but may nevertheless help you to evaluate your own suitability to give the advice demanded, as well as to reflect upon already completed consulting services.

In the following, the reference points for providing good advice are divided according to both their respective crisis phases and the four dimensions just mentioned: clients, fields of practice, advisors, and knowledge domains.

READING GUIDELINE

All the suggestions in this section are intended for advisors working in a crisis context. The four dimensions shown in the diagram (see figure, [here](#)) – client, field of practice, advisor, knowledge domain – are illustrated individually below. The respective icon indicates which of the dimensions the accompanying suggestion relates to.



advisor



knowledge domain



client



field

5. Advising well in the pre-crisis phase

How one views a particular field of practice in calmer times changes simply by hypothetically assuming that things may not be as calm as they appear, but that the field is actually in a pre-crisis phase.



Recognise weak signals: When looking back on a crisis, there are often factors and conditions that can be identified as warning signals that were ignored. Use your status as an outsider and independent expert to scrutinise issues that are a matter of course for insiders. You might perhaps be able to recognise the small warning signs that go unseen by your clients, or which they tend not to take seriously enough.



Prepare for crises: Observe the extent to which crisis-management structures within the organisation you are advising are established and how seriously the possibility of a crisis is taken. Do emergency plans, crisis handbooks, or crisis infrastructures exist? Is crisis prevention treated as a priority by the leadership, as well? If not, the organisation will probably be taken by surprise in the event of a crisis and at the very least be in a poor position to respond to it in a timely manner. In the course of the crisis, too, resources will be lacking that would be of help in finding solutions.



Perceive crisis interests: As socially constructed facts, crises are dealt with collectively, involving many stakeholders from the organisation and those within their sphere. It is important to understand whether, surrounding the organisation you are advising, there are any who have an interest in intensifying and escalating the crisis.



Shape media activities: Media coverage has an essential contribution to what the public perceives as a “crisis”. Through your own public statements, you can help shape both the diagnosis and the framing of a crisis. Such framing is still very volatile in the pre-crisis phase and there is the danger of “encouraging” a crisis through ill-considered use of crisis-like vocabulary.



Reflect upon your own resistance to crisis: As an expert in crises, you will become a part of the crisis situation, and that your behaviour will have an effect on it. It is therefore valuable to be able to predict your demeanour in a crisis beforehand. Recall your personal experiences of past crises and your behaviour at those times. By all means ask those you trust how they perceived you on such occasions. The start of an acute crisis brings along a degree of stress that will lead to restricted perceptive abilities among those involved. How do you evaluate your own responses and resistance to stress?



Reflect upon your own position within the knowledge domain: Consultants represent a domain of knowledge. Scientific advice provides orientation above all when contradictions do not immediately arise. Before providing advice in a crisis, ask yourself how controversial or widely shared your opinions are within your knowledge domain. Would your specialist colleagues support your position or possibly disagree with them publicly? Are you prepared to bring widely shared viewpoints from your domain into the consultation, even if you do not fully share them?

6. Advising well in the acute crisis phase

There are various aspects to consider with regard to your consulting work, should a crisis in fact occur. We have learnt in the course of our research that all those involved in a crisis experience its initial stages as a chaotic phase. Considerable uncertainty and a loss of orientation are prevalent, making it hard to manage the urgency with which one must act. After one has first found one's bearings amid the chaos, the acute crisis phase continues to be characterised by its escalating momentum. This means that the situation develops very dynamically, and information is not yet available or is uncertain and unreliable. Surprising turns in events arise again and again or measures taken to limit the crisis do not achieve the outcomes desired. At the beginning of a crisis, people involved always find themselves in a reactive position "lagging behind" the situation, which is perceived as overly complex. This is not least due to social reasons: those involved will be affiliated to the most varied organisations and nobody possesses an overall view. The situation nevertheless demands a concerted and coordinated approach. Should this succeed, it might be possible in the further course of the crisis to remain "ahead of the curve" and to introduce successive proactive elements.

Under these consulting conditions, the following points should be especially kept in mind:



Organise roles, clarify the task: Owing to the chaotic nature of crises, it can be helpful right at the start to make yourself aware who your client is. Likewise, you should jointly define what exactly your task is. Despite the time pressures involved, you should first find out what expectations and requirements you are to fulfil. What aims should and can be achieved with the aid of your consulting services? For what aspect of the crisis is your specialist knowledge required? These clarifications provide orientation to both parties. Last but not least, you should reject an assignment if it is clear to you that you are unable to contribute anything to efforts to overcome a particular crisis (for instance, because your expertise has been misjudged). Remain sensitive to the requirements for which your expertise has been

requested. Where might you possibly be used as a scapegoat, or your expertise misused for particular ends? You should also clearly communicate your requirements (for example, your fee) from the start and most certainly clarify issues of formal liability before providing any advisory services. Should an assignment be agreed upon, then the separation of consulting and decision-making roles must be emphasised and observed at all times.



Acknowledge stress among all those involved: Those affected by a crisis, including people in management positions, often experience its acute phase as one of overwhelming emotional stress. Their cognitive capacities are quite possibly limited. It might be that your client's behaviour is different to usual: they might be less approachable, even anxious, or they might seem to act cold heartedly. This might come as a surprise to you and to others, but in any event, whether such characteristics prove helpful or compound the situation, do not take them "personally" – attribute them instead to the crisis situation.



Communicating the crisis – internally (A) and externally (B): The rules of communication during a crisis are different to those of everyday life. The dividing line between internal and external communication is more sharply drawn than usual. The "inside" comprises a smaller group of decision makers and functionaries involved with managing the crisis. The "outside" is expanded so that it can even, for instance, include individual stakeholders within the organisation effected. Consultants who are in the position of advising on the "inside" of a crisis must therefore take note of the following.

(A) Internal communication:



(A) Put yourself "in the picture": As an expert, it is crucial that – despite time pressure – you are able from the outset to form your own view of the situation. This means that you should first of all listen. You should not allow yourself to be pushed into giving answers or assessments before you feel you are adequately informed. Especially at the beginning, you are allowed to and should ask questions rather than give answers.



(A) The view of the situation is not the situation itself... (see textbox, above): Those involved in a crisis seek information that remains lastingly valid. This need brings with it the danger of becoming too eager to blinker oneself to the actual facts of the matter: one holds onto a view of the situation that does not reflect to the situation's dynamically developing reality. In order to prevent this from happening, it is important to be completely frank within the inner circle – including discussing possibly far-fetched and radical scenarios. Particularly at the beginning of the crisis, in conformity with the situation's lack of clarity overall, you will tend to be confronted with open-ended questions. Here it is important to point out the full spectrum of options. Later, when you attempt to "get ahead of the curve", detailed

questions requiring precise responses from you are more likely. Here it is important to remain modest and try to provide clear answers whenever possible. Be guided by the nature of your client's question when determining whether a more open-ended approach or a concise and precise answer would be more helpful.



(A) Present the facts in clear language: Before giving advice, it can be helpful to consider how this advice can be most simply communicated to your opposite number. Assume that those involved in an acute crisis are limited by the situation in their cognitive capacities. Using complex language tends to be counterproductive. In addition to using simplified language, it may be worth making use of graphics (such as pictograms) that can be grasped “at a glance”.



(A) Recognise the potential for misunderstanding: If the information available is contradictory, ambiguous, or incomplete, it is all the more important to eliminate the potential for factual misunderstandings. Communicate in “closed loops”, for example: listen carefully to others, repeat what you have understood in your own words, and ask for a confirmation that you have correctly interpreted their input. Doing this ensures that you and your opposite number are working from the same understanding of the facts. Correct even small misunderstandings, because these can also have major consequences. Such close feedback also serves to make communication more objective.



(A) Expect reciprocal effects and anticipate possible scenarios: As an advisor you possess certain expertise. How this expertise can be transferred into practice and under the dynamic circumstances of the crisis is something you may not yet know very much about. Your client may also not yet be able to assess possible consequences. It is thus important to point out, for each piece of advice given, that it could result in different outcomes depending on the context of its application, which you cannot assess yourself from your domain of knowledge.

CASE EXAMPLE

The serious consequences of quasi-decisions

A fire-safety expert was appointed to a crisis team at the scene of a complex accident at sea. The fire onboard a burning trading vessel was to be extinguished, and he had been given a consulting mandate by government decision makers. After analysing the problem, he advised the use of a specific fire-extinguishing agent. The decision makers then directly chose to use this agent and had the procedure tested on site by the crew of a salvage tugboat. Here the expert's advice had a new context, since the crew was not trained to use the extinguishing agent. Incorrect use made the situation worse, resulting in a large explosion, serious injuries, and a shipwreck.



Image: OpenClipart-Vectors/pixabay.com

(B) External communication:



(B) Prioritise strategic communication: In a crisis, uncomfortable messages must be communicated to the outside world. Here the maxim applies that proactive communication at least allows you to control the timing, wording, medium of publication, and nature of the message. Even if you are accustomed as a successful advisor to appearing confidently before the public, crisis communication to the outside world carries a much higher risk of communication breakdowns. Your own communication needs must be subordinated to the need for control and the strategic considerations of crisis communication. During the acute crisis phase, external communication must be strongly focused on how it will affect the further course of the crisis. Excessively pessimistic or optimistic assessments are often deliberately communicated, an example being the “self-destroying prophecy”, a statement made about the future primarily intended to trigger a desired response in the addressees. If successful, the prophecy prevents the occurrence of the prophesied event. This success must often be bought at the cost of some loss of credibility, though, since the disaster’s failure to emerge is taken as evidence that the dangers evoked were exaggerated and the measures taken excessive.



Regulate yourself: Crises are stressful situations – this can hardly be emphasised enough. As an advisor, you will become a part of the situation. It is therefore important how you confront the stress of the situation and what contribution you make to its diffusion. If in your consulting work you act calmly and precisely, this will also have an effect on the crisis team. Those involved who lose their head will, on the contrary, exacerbate the situation. Dealing with the increased attention can also bring personal challenges. In social media, public criticism may escalate into personal insults and possibly even threats. Be aware that this has very little to do with you and your actual counselling services, and that the image that is presented of you is largely out of your control.



Be prepared to make quasi-decisions: Your role as advisor can, despite all attempts at delineation, become somewhat ambivalent. During a crisis, your specialist assessments will, given the lack of other forms of security, gain a great deal of persuasive force. Decision makers are thirsty for counsel during a crisis, and your advice can swiftly become a quasi-decision if, in an uncertain situation, what you offer tips the balance. Have courage to give advice all the same, even if such a quasi-decision is looming. If such a moment arises, then it means that you are the most qualified person to meet it. When implementing the advice, important aspects might be lost. It must therefore be formulated very precisely and ensure that it has been understood correctly (see “Recognise the potential for misunderstanding”,

above). If possible, request the opportunity to accompany the implementation of the decision, as you will be the first person to notice if its consequences have been misjudged.



Review your professional distance: In the course of your consulting, it can be helpful to reflect on the consulting relationship. If, for example, a relationship of trust already existed prior to the crisis situation, this will generally prove helpful during the crisis. However, there is also the risk that, because of this trust, the equally important aspect of professional distance could be transgressed. This will always happen if your opinion and personal assessment are requested instead of your professional expertise.



Prepare to reflect: During an acute crisis there is little time to reflect on the experience. This should be made up for without fail in the post-crisis phase. You should therefore keep copies of all documents, e-mails, and other materials related to your consulting. If you notice points even during the acute crisis phase that would be worth addressing afterwards, then make a note of this. It may in general be worthwhile writing memos. Due to your duty of confidentiality, all data collected must be kept inaccessible to third parties.



Remain anchored in the domain: Crises are situations in which those involved experience a loss of control. You can counter this by remaining anchored within your own knowledge domain. On the basis of the role and assignment that has been given to you, clarify what it is that you are able and willing to provide professionally, and what you are not. Owing to the dynamic of a crisis, it can occur that you are asked for advice on matters outside of your expertise. You should avoid doing so altogether. Concentrate primarily on evidence that has been validated and is widely shared among your professional colleagues. A crisis is not the appropriate moment to exercise your academic rivalries. Advice based on controversial scientific positions will also increase uncertainty in a crisis as soon as other experts speak out and publicly contradict you.



Frame uncertainty: Since scientific knowledge is always fraught with uncertainty, it can easily happen that its introduction makes the situation in a crisis more complex than before. Nevertheless, it is often unavoidable that one must enter the grey area of more-or-less certain knowledge. If findings are very uncertain, they should be communicated as such. Do not let yourself be pushed into an unequivocal answer and make it explicitly clear that science cannot provide certainty in this instance. If you feel that the data is sufficiently certain, then have the courage to share them, but do also communicate any remaining uncertainty.

CASE EXAMPLE

News from the crisis: Digitalisation of administration during the 2015 refugee crisis

Germany's decentralised and specialised departmental data-processing procedures made it initially difficult to coordinate the registration process of asylum seekers across different administrative levels. In September 2015, it was decided that the situation be remedied through comprehensive digitalisation and standardisation of data-processing and exchange processes. The change took place immediately. All participating authorities at the local, state, and federal level were quickly provided access to a shared core-data system.

Image: geralt/pixabay.com



7. Advising well in the post-crisis phase

The post-crisis phase begins with the abatement of the acute situation. For those involved, this phase offers the opportunity to understand the underlying causes of the crisis and to draw long-term lessons.



Frame crises as symptoms: Everyday life lessons can only be learned from a crisis if the crisis is understood as a symptom of more deep-seated problems. Narrow down as precisely as possible the problem that has become visible as a result of the crisis. The more you focus on endogenous rather than exogenous factors when looking for the causes of crises, the more likely it is that changes can be brought about, as only endogenous factors are within the direct control of your client. Highlighting endogenous causes is often understood by those involved as an apportioning of blame, however, and may therefore face rejection. It is important to find the right balance here. Without naming the factors responsible, changes are unlikely to occur, but personal attacks encourage defensive responses. When analysing the problem, it may be advisable to focus on structures, procedures, or more abstract organisational roles, rather than on specific individuals. Media attention also increases the pressure on those responsible to act following a crisis. However, media pressure can lead to highly selective learning. Try to avoid situations where the loudest lesson is learned first and foremost, rather than the most important one.



Instigate robust crisis structures: Another important learning outcome could consist of your client adopting provisions for the next crisis that proved effective in the acute phase of the present one. What organisational structures worked well during the crisis? It may be worthwhile to form a permanent crisis team or develop a crisis manual, should either of these not already be in place. The heightened sensitivity to crises among those in leadership

roles should certainly be maintained. Thus the crisis cycle (see figure “There is always a crisis”, [above](#)) can come full circle.



Reintroduce complexity: In the post-crisis phase, you can gradually reintroduce important aspects of the consulting process that were too complex to be dealt with during the acute crisis phase due to the necessary simplifications and limitations a crisis involves. The more of these issues you document and archive during the crisis itself, the more successful this will be.



Understand the post-crisis phase as a one-off opportunity for consultation: For you as an expert, the post-crisis phase offers an opportunity to be heard within a broader field of practice. The willingness of decision makers to listen to advice and take it seriously can be particularly great at this point, since what has occurred remains very much present, increasing the motivation of those in charge to tackle necessary changes quickly. You should view this window of opportunity as a chance to address structural problems and put them on the agenda of decision makers. At the same time, though, you should remember that crises are always exceptional events, and consider which aspects can be generalised and which cannot.



Set aside a short recovery period: Once a crisis ends, you should then set yourself a small period of time to recover from it. Use this phase for initial reflections. Limit your recovery time from the outset, because the opportunity to provide momentum for decisive changes can quickly pass. Proactively initiate the process of coming to terms with the crisis. As stressful as the acute situation may have been, it would be a crucial mistake now to turn away from it too swiftly in your relief.



Evaluate your crisis experience: In the media or in scientific publications, it is essential that you observe any grace periods or confidentiality rules. You should nevertheless record your experiences in a timely manner so that the insights gained can be shared later in anonymised, abstract form and thus contribute to the lessons that can be drawn from a crisis. In this phase, think again about your own core tasks and consider them separately from the task your client assigned to you. It can be valuable to have a scientific discussion about the crisis (through studies, etc.) and to reflect on it within the professional community. Consider seriously the possibility that your own knowledge domain might also have been partly responsible for the outbreak of the crisis. In this way, how a crisis develops can also be an occasion for the advancement of one's own domain and the consulting services that stem from it. It is also important, though, to be wary of overgeneralising when dealing with your domain's experience of the crisis.



Develop your new contacts: Use and cultivate contacts you made during the crisis, both from your own field of practice and from other knowledge domains. Here you have the opportunity to accompany developments in the field in an advisory capacity over the medium and long term. Interdisciplinary exchange can help to uncover specific blind spots from one's own professional socialisation that could under certain circumstances becoming the starting points for new crises. Working together with other disciplines, you will become less vulnerable in public debates and on social media. It will also broaden your view of the interactions of a crisis with other fields of practice.

8. Conclusion

Every crisis is different, but it is nevertheless worthwhile considering what the basic characteristics of crises are and what they share in common – especially should the situation arise that you are “in demand” as a crisis advisor. Knowledge of the specifics of crises can help you to better navigate your way through the situation. These recommendations are intended to provide orientation for experts who are not yet much involved in crisis management in their everyday work, but who may be involved in fields of practice in which crises might occur. Within crisis management, the occurrence of crises is considered an inevitability. As such, this policy paper can only prepare its readers for an event that, in practice, will usually come as a surprise, but which is anything but improbable. Due to the increasing complexity and interdependence of crises, it will become more common for advisors to be involved as important actors in, and to make their contribution to, crisis management.

These recommendations have been formulated intentionally so as to abstract from the specifics of certain fields of action and knowledge domains. They can facilitate the consulting work of natural scientists as well as financial experts or political scientists. Nevertheless, crises by their very nature can never be comprehensively examined. There are specifics within fields of practice that we could not consider here, and knowledge about crises can never fully replace the experience of one. But recognising the patterns presented in this paper will provide you with additional security in the event of a crisis that could be crucial in helping you to give well-informed advice under pressure. Even if you should never personally provide advice during a crisis, it can inform your consulting practice if you examine (potential) clients, their fields of practice, your own personality, and your own knowledge domain in the light of crisis developments.

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