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## Police leaders dealing with blame: some crisis leadership lessons

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# Introduction



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Recently, the police service has come under considerable media scrutiny and calls for greater transparency in the light of a few high profile incidents

How can the police deal with this negative attention in media and Parliament?

To answer this question, we will

- (1) Introduce the concept of crisis
- (2) Explain how crises can lead to blame
- (3) Highlight why crisis leadership is a key component of policing
- (4) List some crisis leadership lessons

Please keep in mind that “crisis and leadership are closely intertwined phenomena” (Boin and ‘t Hart, 2003, p. 544).

# Defining a crisis

A crisis is usually defined as “a serious threat to the basic structures or the fundamental values and norms of a system, which under time pressure and highly uncertain circumstances necessitates making vital decisions ” (Rosenthal, Charles, and 't Hart, 1989: 10 cited in Boin, 't Hart, Stern, and Sundelius, 2005: 2; underlining added SR).

# There are different types of crisis, including

- Natural disasters
- Industrial accidents
- Economic crises
- Political scandals
- Social conflicts
- Terrorist acts
- Policy fiascos (Bovens & 't Hart, 1998)
- Institutional crisis (Alink, Boin, and 't Hart, 2001)

# Note that

- (1) Crises are different from incidents as incidents are “large, but essentially [happen] within predictable frames of reference” (’t Hart, 2011)
- (2) Crises can occur at the operational level and the policy/political/strategic level; and
- (3) A crisis is not a crisis in and by itself; it sometimes needs to become defined as a crisis (’t Hart, 1993)

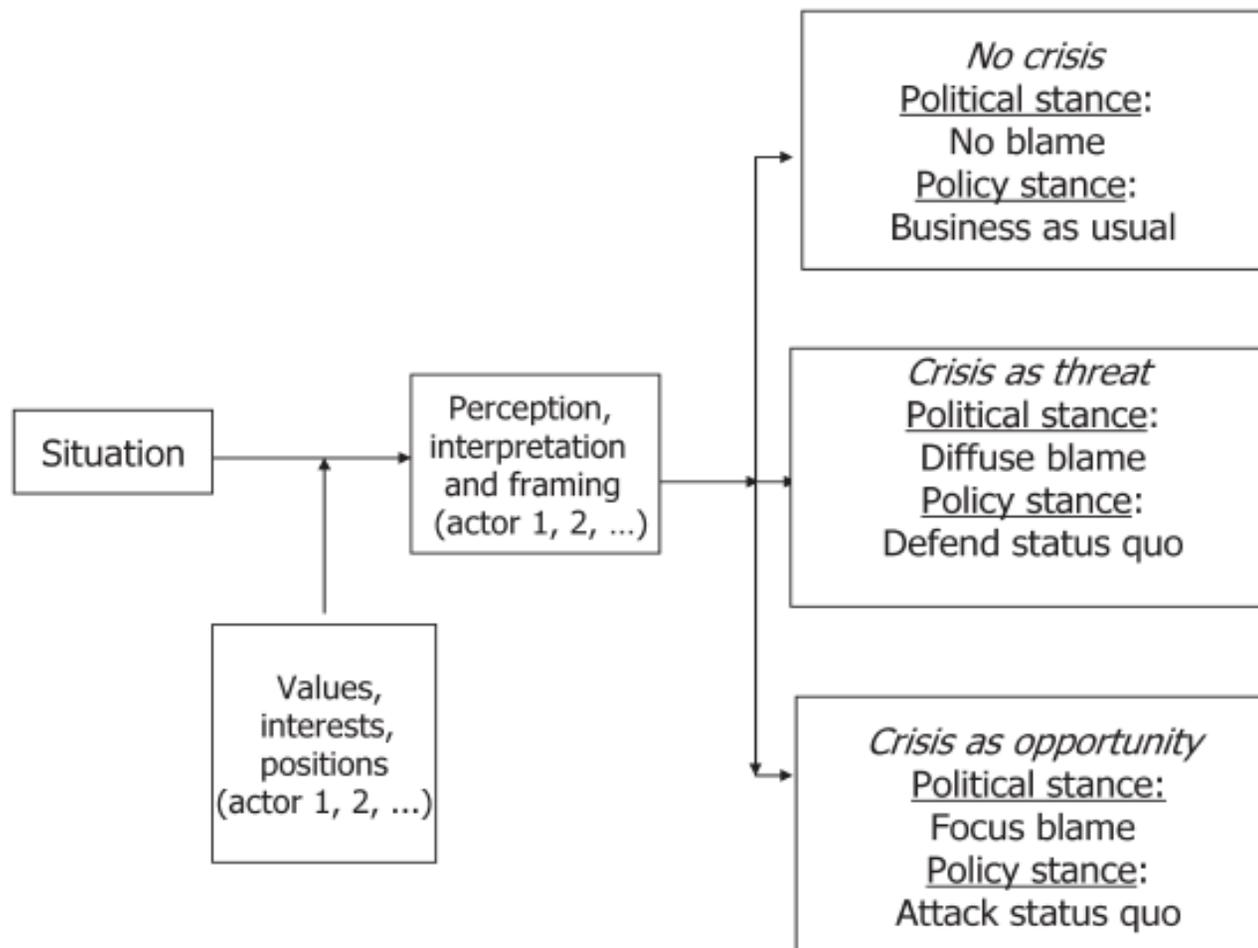
# How a crisis results in blame



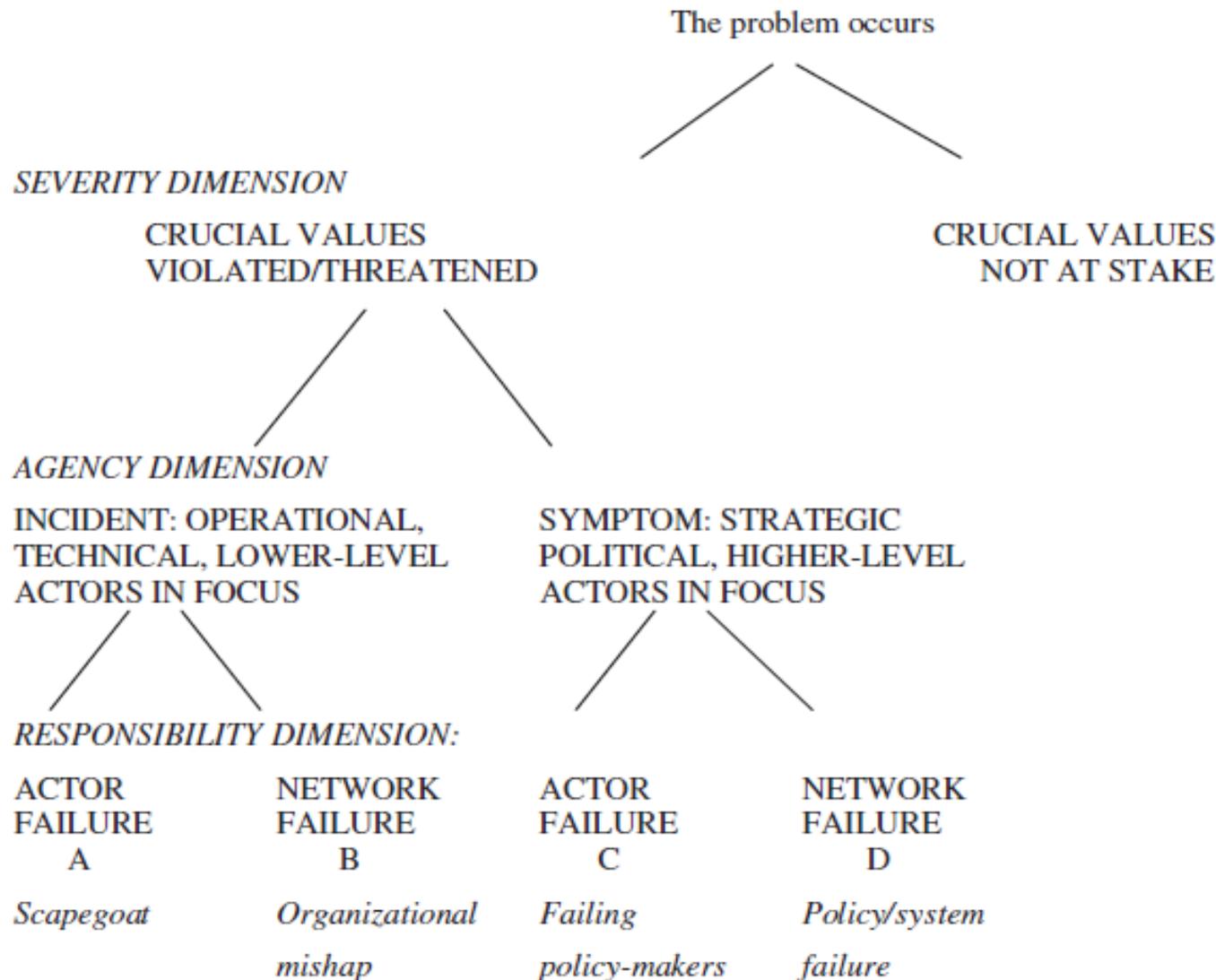
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- Negativity bias = people focus more on things that go wrong than on things that go well (Rozin and Royzman, 2001; McGraw et al., 2011; Hood, 2011).
- Framing contest
  - Is the incident a crisis? ('t Hart, 1993; Bovens and 't Hart, 1998)
  - What were the consequences of the crisis? (Hood, 2011)
  - Who can be blamed? (Stone, 1997; Brändström and Kuipers, 2003)

# Figure 1. Crises as framing contests (Boin, 't Hart, and McConnell, 2009: 84)



# Figure 2. Constructing blame by framing political crises (Brändström and Kuipers, 2003: 302)



# How much blame will they receive?

This depends on

- How much harm the crisis caused (Hood, 2011)

In combination with:

- The type of crisis
    - Victim cluster = the organization is (one of) the victim(s)
    - Accidental cluster = the crisis is an accident which happened outside the sphere of the organization's control
    - Preventable cluster = the organization caused the crisis
  - Did a similar type of crisis happen before?
  - Did actors have a weak or strong reputation prior to the crisis?
- (Coombs, 2007: 141-3)

# In short

- Blame can range from very mild and even support to calls for resignation (and everything in between) (Hood et al., 2009).
- Blame is not stable, but fluctuates
  - The level of blame one faces changes over time (depending, for instance, on how one responds to blame)
  - The blame can shift from one person/organization to another; and from the operational level (police officers, police chiefs) to the political level

# Table 1. Some basic strategic options for officeholders facing media firestorms: Denial and admission of problem and responsibility (Hood et al., 2009:698).

<i>A: Problem Denial PD</i>	<i>B: Problem Admission but Responsibility Denial (PA + RD)</i>	<i>C: Problem and Responsibility Admission (PA + RA)</i>
<i>A1. Pure denial ('crisis, what crisis?')</i>	<i>B1. Open stance on who is responsible (announce or agree to investigation to determine who is responsible, without accepting responsibility)</i>	<i>C1. Explanation-only response, offering some account of what went wrong, but not accepting culpability</i>
<i>A2. Qualified denial (admission that there is some problem but denial that it is serious or significant (e.g., through justificatory arguments))</i>	<i>B2. Assert others to be responsible (blame victims, other agents, predecessors, successors, subordinates, superordinates, colleagues, etc.)</i>	<i>C2. Institutional action-taking response, offering institutional apology, compensation, remedial action (e.g., dismissal or disciplining of subordinates)</i>
<i>A3. Denial plus counterattack (portrayal of critics as whingers, knockers, politically motivated, etc., assertion that onus of proof rests on critics, threats of lawsuits, dismissals of moles and leakers, and other sanctions)</i>	<i>B3. Admission of some responsibility, but denial of major or ultimate responsibility (e.g., by offering 'wrong kind of snow' excuses or admission of only partial or 'technical' but not substantial responsibility)</i>	<i>C3. Admission of personal culpability (which may include resignation or an acknowledgement of error accompanied by an expression of determination to stay on and sort out the situation)</i>

# Blame and reputation management

- The basic idea is that a proper response to blame will result in lower blame levels, thus saving the organization's reputation (Hood, 2011; Hood et al., 2009; Coombs, 2007, 1998)
- According to the literature, a proper response consists of becoming more accommodative (so PA&RD or even PA&RA in Table 1 in the previous slide) when facing higher blame levels; though this might not always work in reality (Hood et al., 2009; Resodihardjo, Van Eijk, and Carroll, 2012; Resodihardjo, Carroll, Van Eijk, and Maris, forthcoming)

So, what does this all mean for the Police Service?

# The current context of Police Service

1. Operating in a “complex social, political, and organizational environment” (Pearson-Goff and Herrington, 2014: 14).
2. Increasing demand for accountability (e.g. new framework of democratic accountability with Police & Crime Commissioner) (Association of Police and Crime Commissioners, n.d.).
3. Advancing technology (Hartley, 2014) such as the role of social media in spreading the news of alleged police misconduct.
4. Shrinking of the state (Hartley, 2014) (e.g. austerity measures)
5. Facing reorganizations/reforms of the Police Service, “initially from bureau-professionalism to managerialism, and more recently from managerialism to a hybridised model of local governance that combines elements of consumerism, democratic localism and bureau-professionalism” (Gilling, 2014: 81).
6. Increasing need for community engagement (e.g. coproduction of policing) (Bullock and Leeney, 2013)

# Police leadership



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In an interview on leading teams, Sara Thornton (then Chief Constable of Thames Valley Police, now Chair of the National Police Chiefs' Council) addresses some of the police leadership characteristics which also play a role when dealing with blame:

- “The biggest challenge when you are leading an organization is that the buck stops here [the leader]” (Cambridge Judge Business School, 2014)
- The “sense of responsibility” for a big organization (Cambridge Judge Business School, 2014)
- “Dealing with risk on a daily basis” (Cambridge Judge Business School, 2014)
- “We are dealing with pretty serious issues, sometimes matters of life and death” (Cambridge Judge Business School, 2014)
- Intensity and the speed of decision-making is higher than in other contexts (Cambridge Judge Business School, 2014)

# Crisis leadership lessons



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Considering the pivotal role police plays in society, managing reputation damage is of crucial importance. As the literature shows, leadership plays a key role in responding to any threats to the reputation.

# Crisis leadership lessons



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1. Try to control or influence the framing contest from the moment an incident takes place (cf. Boin, 't Hart, McConnell, 2009).
2. Be aware that key stakeholders (including the press and the public) may perceive the situation differently. You need to be able to acknowledge and deal with a variety of perspectives and concerns (Johnson, 2012).
3. Continuously engage with key internal and external actors in order to, for instance, become aware a crisis is taking place, decide how to deal with it, and make sure that crisis communication is consistent (Coombs, 2007; Boin, 't Hart, Stern, and Sundelius, 2005).

# Crisis leadership lessons



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4. Connecting with key stakeholders and explaining what is happening and why certain actions are being taken, will help to build support and maintain/repair credibility (Boin et al., 2005).
5. Ascertain how much blame you are receiving in order to respond appropriately (e.g. don't downplay the incident if a lot of people perceive the incident as really bad) (Hood et al, 2009; Coombs, 1998).
6. Ideally, proper closure includes learning from what happened (both in terms of the incident itself as well as the way in which the crisis and/or reputation was managed) (Boin et al., 2005; Johnson, 2012).
7. In short, "the management of public confidence is a leadership challenge in itself" (Boin and 't Hart, 2003, p. 551)

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