

Tackling Wicked Problems in Risk and Crisis Communication through Design Thinking: Insights from the ICRCC Conferences 2024 and 2025

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Abstract: This paper compares two design thinking workshops conducted at the International Crisis and Risk Communication Conferences (ICRCC) in 2024 and 2025, each tackling a distinct yet equally wicked communication challenge. The first workshop addressed internal cyber risk communication, exploring how to shift employee behavior and internalize security messages in organizational contexts. The second workshop focused on governmental crisis readiness, co-developing strategies to improve political and administrative response to crises such as cyberattacks, political scandals, and public emergencies. Each workshop utilized human-centered design approaches – emphasizing empathy, co-creation, and rapid prototyping – anchored in the IDEA model and enriched by tools such as persona development, message mapping, and readiness canvases. This comparative analysis demonstrates the versatility of design thinking in navigating complex, under-researched issues in risk and crisis communication, and offers actionable insights for theory, practice, and pedagogy in strategic communication planning.

Keywords — Crisis communication, cyber risk, design thinking, government readiness, internalization

SUGGESTED CITATION: Björck, A., Vogel, B., Iverson, J. O., Venette S. J., Daba-Buzoianu, C., Pugnetti, C., Champagne-Poirier, O. (2025). Tackling wicked problems in risk and crisis communication through design thinking: Insights from the ICRCC Conferences 2024 and 2025. *Proceedings of the 2025 International Crisis and Risk Communication Conference*, 13(1) 59-62. <https://www.doi.org/10.69931/001c.142843>

INTRODUCTION

Given increasingly interconnected systems and volatile sociopolitical landscapes, crises rarely occur in isolation. Today's communicators must navigate *multiple*, often overlapping crises – ranging from cyberattacks and political scandals to public health emergencies and reputational threats. These crises are inherently *wicked problems* [1, 2]: they are ill-defined,

ISSN: 3068-6539

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<https://doi.org/10.69931/001c.142843>

resistant to linear solutions, and demand iterative, cross-disciplinary responses. Compounding this complexity is the *human factor* – organizational vulnerabilities rooted not only in infrastructure but in perception, culture, and behavior [3].

Against this backdrop, the imperative for audience-centered communication becomes critical. Traditional top-down crisis messaging often fails to address how individuals feel, what they believe, and what ultimately motivates them to act. Research shows that effective risk and crisis messages must engage both emotional and cognitive dimensions to achieve behavioral change [4]. This includes making messages locally relevant, emotionally resonant, and practically actionable.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Crisis communication has evolved from a predominantly reactive practice to a proactive, strategic function that must contend with complex, overlapping, and emotionally charged challenges. As crises grow in frequency and complexity – ranging from systemic cyberattacks to multifaceted political disruptions – the theoretical underpinnings of effective communication must adapt accordingly. At the heart of this evolution lies a shift toward *audience-centric* and *emotionally resonant* messaging that integrates both cognitive and affective dimensions to facilitate behavioral change [4, 5].

Central to this shift is the recognition that crisis communication must be designed not merely to inform but to influence – to engage stakeholder perceptions, internalize meaning, and prompt action. The IDEA model [5] has become a foundational framework, emphasizing four essential elements of effective message construction: *Internalization*, *Distribution*, *Explanation*, and *Action*. In the first workshop analyzed in this study, the IDEA model provided the conceptual backbone for message design. However, it was paired with additional frameworks to enhance stakeholder engagement and situational specificity. For example, the deep metaphor elicitation enabled to uncover the emotional underpinnings of employee vulnerability – such as feelings of helplessness or detachment – and to craft internalization strategies targeting these affective states [3]. Personas were used as empathy tools to simulate diverse stakeholder realities, allowing participants to tailor messages accordingly.

The ICRCC 2025 workshop on governmental crisis readiness extended this theoretical foundation by integrating stakeholder management principles and scenario-based planning. Drawing from Steven Venette’s Message Map Canvas [6], participants structured communication responses across three dimensions: reporting the event, connecting with the audience, and providing efficacy. This framework allowed teams to articulate not only *what* to communicate but *how* to connect emotionally and credibly with diverse publics during moments of institutional fragility. In addition, the 2025 workshop introduced the Crisis Readiness Canvas developed by Albena Björck based on Björck, Blåse & Bastida [3]. This tool supports strategic planning for public-sector crisis communication by aligning readiness actions with real-world constraints, responsibilities, and stakeholder expectations. It enables organizations to move from theoretical preparedness to applied, scenario-specific planning – bridging the gap between strategic foresight and practical execution.

Finally, Design Thinking served as the overarching methodology in both workshops. As a structured, iterative, and human-centered innovation approach, design thinking fosters collaborative problem framing, rapid ideation, and low-fidelity prototyping. It is particularly well suited to “wicked problems” that involve ambiguity, contested meanings, and stakeholder diversity. By embedding design thinking into risk and crisis communication workshops, the authors created spaces where theory and practice could intersect – where models like IDEA, Venette’s Message Map, and the Crisis Readiness Canvas could be tested, adapted, and brought to life through co-creation.

METHODS

While both workshops followed a collaborative, tool-driven design thinking structure, their formats varied by audience, timeframe, and intended outcomes. Table 1 shows a structured comparison [7].

In the ICRCC 2024 workshop, the objective was to address employee vulnerability in the face of cyber risks, particularly the persistence of risky behaviors despite repeated training. The session was built around the IDEA model and emphasized *internalization* as a behavioral lever. Participants worked in five moderated focus groups, each engaging with a pre-developed persona representing different employee types with varying levels of digital literacy and exposure to risk. These personas – such as “Sam,” a junior front-office worker with limited cybersecurity awareness – served to anchor the reflection in real-world organizational dynamics. Structured worksheets guided participants through iterative phases aligned with the IDEA model: Internalization, Distribution, Explanation, and Action. This approach allowed for deep, affective engagement with the emotional and cognitive barriers to secure behavior.

By contrast, the ICRCC 2025 workshop focused on governmental crisis readiness. Here, the goal was to co-develop a Crisis Communication Readiness Guide for complex and unpredictable public-sector scenarios such as the death of a government official or a cyberattack on critical infrastructure. The method combined stakeholder mapping, real-time scenario planning, and message prototyping. Teams of practitioners and scholars worked through a two-phase structure: brainstorming/ideation followed by prototyping/implementation. They used templates such as Venette’s Message Map and the newly developed Björck Crisis Readiness Canvas to map stakeholder needs, craft audience-centered messages, and design coordinated response strategies.

Both workshops extensively used collaborative, time-boxed exercises and tangible artifacts – grids, canvases, sticky notes – that embodied design thinking’s emphasis on iteration and co-creation. However, their procedural rhythms differed: while the 2024 workshop moved linearly through the IDEA model’s dimensions, the 2025 session emphasized scenario

immersion and synthesis through elevator pitches forcing participants to distill and communicate their strategies succinctly. Ultimately, both methods foregrounded empathy, stakeholder orientation, and creative problem-solving – hallmarks of design thinking – while adapting their structure to fit the crisis type, institutional setting, and communicative goals.

Table 1: Comparison of Design Thinking Workshops 2024 and 2025

Dimension	Workshop 1: Cyber Risk (ICRCC 2024)	Workshop 2: Governmental Crisis (ICRCC 2025)
Format	5 focus groups, 90 minutes	4 design teams, 120 minutes
Personas	3 predefined employee personas	4 pre-defined crisis scenarios, stakeholder mappings
Structure	Iterations along IDEA dimensions	Empathize, Ideate, Prototype phases
Phases	Internalization → Distribution → Explanation → Action → Strategy Design	Empathize → Ideate → Prototype → Pitch
Theory-based Tools	Deep Metaphor Maps, personas, IDEA worksheets	Message Map, Readiness Canvas, Scenarios
Data Collection	Sheets, observation, elevator pitches	Group outputs, elevator pitches

KEY FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The comparative analysis of the two design thinking workshops reveals critical insights into the use of human-centered methodologies in addressing wicked problems in crisis and risk communication. Though the workshops differed in target audiences, organizational contexts, and specific tools, they shared important commonalities in how they leveraged empathy, co-creation, and structured ideation to generate actionable outcomes.

1. Emotional and Cognitive Engagement as a Prerequisite for Behavioral Change

Both workshops demonstrated that messages succeeded when they addressed both what audiences *feel* and what they *understand* – an alignment of affective and cognitive engagement. In the 2024 cyber risk workshop, internalization emerged as a particularly under-addressed yet essential element of communication. Participants noted that traditional awareness campaigns often fail because they appeal to logic and policy rather than lived experience or emotional risk perception. By contrast, the use of deep metaphors – such as the “mythical hacker” or the feeling of helplessness – enabled workshop participants to connect with the fears and mental models employees hold about cyber threats.

Similarly, in the 2025 workshop on governmental readiness, participants were encouraged to move beyond protocol-based communication and instead design messages that could restore trust, provide reassurance, and communicate clarity during crisis events. The use of Venette’s Message Map helped participants systematically address the “what,” “why,” and “what now” dimensions of a crisis message – hereby bridging information with empathy and action.

These findings confirm previous research highlighting the need to construct messages that are locally relevant, emotionally resonant, and cognitively clear [4, 5]. This insight strongly aligned with the use of Design Thinking to support the focus on emotional-cognitive messaging and internalization according to Norman [8]. Whether addressing cyber vulnerabilities or public governance, behavioral change was perceived as dependent on audience identification with the message – something that abstract warnings or generalized checklists alone fail to achieve.

2. Personas and Scenarios Enable Contextualization and Empathy

A second key insight was Personas and scenarios anchored discussions in lived realities, enabling empathy and context-specific design that avoided abstraction. In both workshops, participants worked from structured profiles – either fictional employee personas (2024) or crisis scenarios based on real governmental challenges (2025).

For example, in the cyber workshop, teams crafted strategies specifically for personas like “Amelie,” a tech-savvy middle manager, or “Elias,” a skeptical senior employee who sees cyber risk as someone else’s problem. By designing from the perspective of these personas, participants moved from generic campaigns to more nuanced interventions. In the 2025 workshop, the four scenarios (e.g., a cyberattack on the national hospital, the resignation of a high-ranking official) forced teams to address emotionally complex, politically sensitive, and logistically urgent situations. These helped illuminate the need for cross-functional and cross-agencies coordination, early messaging alignment, and the importance of defining shared language across agencies.

3. Design Thinking Fosters Ownership, Creativity, and Systemic Thinking

Design thinking proved to be more than a process – it functioned as a cultural reset. Participants highlighted how design thinking encouraged divergent thinking, challenged institutional assumptions, and supported iterative learning [9]. Many remarked on how liberating it was to explore ideas without immediately evaluating feasibility. This “divergent thinking” phase, followed by structured synthesis and prototyping, allowed for a safe space to surface contradictions, challenge assumptions, and iterate toward better-fit solutions in alignment with Liedtka et al. [10].

Moreover, both workshops showed how design thinking enables systemic thinking in crisis communication. Rather than focusing only on crafting a message, both settings focused on when to communicate, how to coordinate among actors, and who should be involved. In the 2025 session, tools like the Crisis Readiness Canvas helped considering readiness as a

multidimensional construct – including stakeholder trust, institutional capacity, and political timing. In 2024, the IDEA model was not just a messaging tool, but a guide to understanding how communication unfolds over time.

These findings hold important implications for both crisis communication practice and academic research. First, the integration of empathy-driven design tools like personas, metaphors, and message maps should be more widely adopted in training and strategic planning processes. Second, the versatility of frameworks like the IDEA model and readiness canvases suggests their value as bridging tools between academic theory and real-world application. The process helped test some assumptions of scholars as well as uncover unanticipated ideas. Finally, the use of design thinking in a workshop format demonstrates its potential not only as a method for communication design, but as a pedagogical approach for building strategic capacity within organizations. Future research should examine how the outputs of such workshops translate into implementation and impact within organizations and governments. Furthermore, digital tools such as Miro or collaborative platforms could extend the reach and scalability of such interventions.

CONCLUSION

Design Thinking proves valuable for surfacing underexplored dimensions in crisis communication, especially around cyber and political risk. Future workshops could test the use of digital collaborative platforms (e.g., Miro) or simulate real-time decision-making with adaptive scenarios. Further publication on segmentation and readiness modeling [3] is encouraged.

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