

Adaptive Stakeholder Relationship Management under Persistent Instability: Integrating Contingency Leadership and SRM

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Abstract: This poster presents a conceptual framework for understanding crisis communication under conditions of persistent instability, where crises function as ongoing governance conditions rather than isolated events. Building on Diers-Lawson's Stakeholder Relationship Management (SRM) framework, the model highlights how leadership adaptation through the calibration of authority and communication strategies, shapes stakeholder evaluations of trust, legitimacy, and credibility over time. It outlines key relational dynamics, including governance capacity, relational sensemaking, authority and legitimacy negotiation, relational strain, and institutional learning. Designed as a research-in-progress, the framework provides an analytical lens for examining how institutions sustain stakeholder relationships under prolonged uncertainty. It also enables cross-national comparison by exploring how differences in trust environments, governance structures, and institutional capacities influence relational preparedness and communication outcomes.

Keywords — Adaptive relational governance, contingency leadership, crisis communication, persistent instability, stakeholder relationship management (SRM)

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INTRODUCTION

Recent crises, such as COVID-19, are characterized by prolonged uncertainty, evolving evidence, and sustained media and public attention [1]. These dynamics require institutions not only respond rapidly but also maintain communication, coordination, and legitimacy over extended periods [2], [3], [4]. Increasingly, research conceptualizes crisis communication outcomes as relational [5], where stakeholder responses, such as trust, compliance and acceptance of guidance, are shaped not only by what is communicated, but by how institutions are perceived in terms of competence, credibility, and legitimacy [6]. Consistent with contingency leadership theory, leadership in crisis contexts is situational and adaptive, requiring continuous adjustment to changing conditions and stakeholder expectations [5], [6]. While contingency leadership (CL)

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explains how leadership adjusts to situational demands, stakeholder relationship management (SRM) explains how these adjustments are interpreted through relational processes [8], [6]. In line with Diers-Lawson's Stakeholder Relationship Management (SRM) framework [6], which integrates with contingency theory approaches [8], crisis communication is conceptualized as a process of adaptive relational governance, in which leadership adaptation functions as the mechanism through which institutions sustain stakeholder relationships under conditions of persistent instability [5].

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Crisis communication scholarship has increasingly moved beyond the assumption that crises are entirely unpredictable, instead conceptualizing them as untimely yet largely foreseeable events that require sustained preparedness and adaptive response [6]. This perspective shifts attention from reactive communication toward proactive capacity-building, emphasizing the importance of anticipating relational, organizational, and societal dynamics that shape crisis outcomes [9]. In this view, crisis communication is embedded in broader processes of governance and ongoing stakeholder engagement rather than limited to isolated response moments [5].

In crisis settings, leaders must continuously adapt their approach, shifting between directive and participatory modes and calibrating authority in response to uncertainty, stakeholder expectations, and institutional constraints [5], [6]. Leadership is thus conceptualized as contingent and understood as a dynamic and context-responsive process that requires ongoing adjustment instead of application of fixed strategies [9]. Stakeholder perceptions of trust, legitimacy, and credibility play a central role in determining communication effectiveness in crisis contexts [5], [8]. Through sustained dialogue, responsiveness, and transparency, institutions can cultivate relationships that enhance communication effectiveness and support positive public perceptions [5]. This relational perspective aligns with broader calls to strengthen preparedness not only in operational terms, but also in terms of relational capacity - the ability to maintain trust and cooperation under conditions of uncertainty [9]. Effective stakeholder engagement also requires sensitivity to cultural and social diversity: Brooks et al. [10] emphasize that communication must be culturally responsive to be perceived as inclusive and credible across different populations. Variations in communication norms, values, and institutional trust can significantly influence how messages are interpreted and whether they lead to desired behavioral outcomes. Collectively, these perspectives suggest that effective crisis communication depends on both adaptive leadership and relational capacity. The conceptual framework, referred to as adaptive stakeholder relationship management under persistent instability, captures this dynamic process and provides a basis for examining how institutions navigate uncertainty through relationally grounded and context-responsive practice.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Based on Diers-Lawson's Stakeholder Relationship Management (SRM) framework [5], this study proposes a conceptual framework that captures how institutions manage stakeholder relationships under conditions of persistent instability. The framework of adaptive stakeholder relationship management under persistent instability integrates contingency leadership and stakeholder relationship management to explain how leadership adaptation and relational processes jointly shape communication outcomes. As illustrated in Figure 1, the model outlines a cyclical process through which leadership adaptation mediates the relationship between institutional action and stakeholder responses over time.



Figure 1. *Adaptive Stakeholder Relationship Management*

The process begins with governance capacity and preparedness, which refers to the structural and organizational conditions that enable institutions to respond to crises. This includes the availability of resources, coordination mechanisms, decision-making structures, and prior preparedness. Governance capacity shapes the extent to which institutions are able to act consistently, respond in a timely manner, and maintain coherent communication across levels of governance. Building on this foundation, institutions engage in relational sensemaking, interpreting evolving conditions in relation to stakeholder expectations, perceptions, and emotional responses. In addition to responding to objective developments, institutions must assess how situations are interpreted by different stakeholder groups, including levels of concern, uncertainty, and perceived relevance. This process reflects the relational orientation of SRM, where meaning is co-constructed through interaction. These interpretations inform leadership adaptation, the central mechanism of the model. Drawing on contingency leadership, this stage involves the continuous calibration of leadership approaches in response to situational demands. Leaders may shift between directive and participatory modes, adjust the degree of centralization, and modify communication strategies depending on uncertainty, stakeholder pressures, and institutional constraints. Leadership adaptation is therefore not a one-time adjustment but an ongoing process of aligning authority and communication with changing conditions. Leadership actions are subsequently subject to relationship evaluation by stakeholders. Consistent with SRM, stakeholders assess institutional performance based on perceived competence, credibility, legitimacy, and consistency. These evaluations shape key outcomes such as trust, compliance, and acceptance of guidance. Importantly, communication effectiveness is not determined solely by message content, but by how leadership actions are interpreted within existing relationships. Over time, prolonged instability gives rise to relational strain, as stakeholders experience fatigue, declining attention, or reduced willingness to comply. Institutions may also face resistance, contestation, or fragmentation of trust across different groups. This stage highlights that stakeholder relationships are not static but can deteriorate if not continuously managed and adapted. In parallel, institutions operate under capacity constraints, including limited resources, coordination challenges, and competing demands. These constraints influence how effectively institutions can sustain engagement and adapt their leadership practices across multiple stakeholder groups. Ideally, the process culminates in institutional learning, where experiences from earlier stages are reflected upon and incorporated into future preparedness and response strategies. Learning may involve adjustments to communication practices, coordination mechanisms, or approaches to stakeholder engagement. This feedback loop reinforces governance capacity and enhances relational preparedness for future crises. Overall, the framework conceptualizes crisis communication as a dynamic cycle in which leadership adaptation continuously mediates between institutional capacity and stakeholder relationships. Instead of treating crises as temporary disruptions, the model emphasizes the ongoing nature of instability and the need for institutions to sustain trust and legitimacy through adaptive and relationally grounded practices over time.

COMPARATIVE POTENTIAL

The proposed framework has in addition a capacity to support structured cross-national comparison. By conceptualizing crisis communication as a dynamic and relational process, the model allows for the systematic examination of how adaptive stakeholder relationship management unfolds across different institutional, societal, and national settings. The framework highlights that leadership adaptation and stakeholder relationships are shaped by contextual variations that influence both institutional action and stakeholder response. In particular, the framework enables comparison across institutional trust environments, where differing levels of baseline trust affect how leadership actions are interpreted and whether communication efforts translate into compliance and cooperation. It also allows for the analysis of governance structures, including centralized versus decentralized systems, which shape coordination processes, decision-making authority, and the consistency of communication across levels of governance. Furthermore, the model can be applied to examine the influence of disinformation environments, where varying levels of information contestation affect stakeholder perceptions and institutional credibility. Similarly, differences in legal and regulatory frameworks may condition how authority is exercised and justified, influencing perceptions of trust, compliance, and acceptance of guidance. The framework also accommodates variation in cultural and social contexts, recognizing that communication norms, values, and expectations shape how messages are interpreted and whether they resonate with diverse stakeholder groups. By integrating these dimensions, the framework provides a basis for assessing relational preparedness - the capacity of institutions to sustain trust, legitimacy, and effective engagement under conditions of prolonged instability. This comparative perspective allows to examine how structural conditions and adaptive leadership practices interact to produce different relational outcomes across settings.

CONCLUSION

The conceptual framework that links leadership adaptation with relational processes such as trust, compliance and acceptance of guidance, highlights the importance of viewing crisis communication as an ongoing process shaped by continuous interaction between institutions and their stakeholders. This framework offers a useful lens for examining how institutions navigate uncertainty, particularly in environments characterized by evolving expectations, uneven trust, and complex governance arrangements. It suggests that effective crisis communication depends not only on the ability to respond, but on the capacity to adapt leadership practices and sustain relationships over time. In this sense, the concept of relational preparedness provides a way to assess how institutions maintain engagement and cooperation under prolonged disruption. As a conceptual contribution, the framework supports future empirical research, including cross-national studies that examine how leadership adaptation and stakeholder relationships unfold in different institutional settings. It may also

inform practice by encouraging a stronger focus on relationship-building, coordination, and adaptive leadership in crisis preparedness efforts, where sustaining trust becomes a central condition for effective governance under instability.

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