

Organisations often learn too little from disasters and crises

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From recurrent oil disasters to the outbreak of contagious diseases or

major fires. Public organisations often learn too little from such crises, according to public administration specialist Wout Broekema. Staff frequently fail to communicate information adequately, which means that lessons are often forgotten. Ph.D. defence 7 November.

Wout Broekema investigated why some organisations do learn lessons from crises and others either fail to learn or learn very little. He analysed over sixty disasters in the Netherlands that took place between 2000 (Enschede firework disaster) up to and including 2012 (Facebook riots in Haren); he also studied four cross-border disasters in Europe. Broekema examined more than 120 assessment reports, [crisis](#) plans and protocols; he talked with crisis experts involved in these [disasters](#) and looked at the political reactions. He discovered a number of crucial conditions necessary for organisations to learn from a crisis.

An open organisation culture seems to be essential: staff have to dare to and be allowed to make mistakes: that's how people learn. The level of 'politicisation' - is the crisis receiving enough strategic management attention? - is crucial. This creates the necessary pressure to actively address weak points and provides the opening to implement more drastic changes. Broekema: "The problem is that information often just doesn't get through to the right place. A lot of knowledge gets lost through reorganisations or because the experts involved voluntarily leave the organisation for another job. It's mainly a question of making sure that lessons that have been learned don't get forgotten."

Broekema also looked at the role of mayors in a crisis. More than 200 mayors responded to his questions about handling a hypothetical disaster. This survey showed that mayors who have been in the same role for a long time are often less inclined to implement crucial changes after a disaster. "It may be that they have become so embedded in the organisation," Broekema suggests. Mayors who have a higher intrinsic motivation for public matters also seem to be more likely to learn from

crisis situations.

Given the chaos, time pressure and lack of reliable information, it is difficult to learn during a crisis what can be improved, but that's when you can get the greatest benefit, Broekema remarks. He advises organisations to also include elements from earlier crises in their evaluations and to look at crises that didn't end so well. "That's when different patterns emerge and organisations are able to make valuable improvements to their reaction to future crises. The lessons from several crises and exercises can be turned into good checklist for staff. In other words: Don't let a good crisis go to waste."

Provided by Leiden University

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