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Are You Ready for a Crisis? Communication and Continuity in the Aftermath

Diana L. Ashe

University of North Carolina at Wilmington, ashed@uncw.edu

Rick Olsen

University of North Carolina at Wilmington, olsenr@uncw.edu

Colleen A. Reilly

University of North Carolina at Wilmington, reillyc@uncw.edu

Matthew TenHuisen

University of North Carolina at Wilmington, tenhuisenm@uncw.edu

See next page for additional authors

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Presenter Information

Diana L. Ashe, Rick Olsen, Colleen A. Reilly, and Matthew TenHuisen

Are You Ready for a Crisis? Communication and Continuity in the Aftermath

We will lead an interactive workshop that will engage participants in planning, negotiating, and recovering from a variety of institutional crises. Participants will leave with concrete plans for the stages of crisis preparation and recovery. We will begin by recounting UNCW's experiences prior to, during, and after Hurricane Florence, which made landfall in Wilmington, NC, on September 14, 2018, and caused considerable damage to our campus and the surrounding communities through intensive wind, record rainfall, and widespread flooding. Despite having completed a FEMA-initiated simulation exercise the previous year that focused on the destruction of the campus by a category 4 hurricane, stakeholders on and around our campus were unprepared for many of the circumstances presented by the actual disaster.

We will invite participants to reflect on the sorts of crises that their institutions are likely to encounter or have encountered. This will lead into an activity during which participants examine potential crises through the perspectives of anticipation versus avoidance. Participants will consider what sorts of plans can be developed to mitigate potential crises. Such plans need to focus on assisting people with the emotional effects of crises while handling the logistical and pragmatic matters relevant to the possible recovery of the institution. Department chairpersons may want to establish communication processes for connecting people during natural disasters or violence on campus and support structures for those who are directly impacted by the events. Additionally, departments may want to generate checklists, training, and instructional alternatives to assist during the crisis and ease the post-crisis recovery. Our workshop will separate participants by crisis categories and ask them to conceptualize and draft helpful resources such as checklists, processes, and other materials.

In the final segment of our workshop, we will focus on the aftermath of the crisis and the ways that chairpersons can assist their colleagues and students to engage in retrospective sensemaking. As Weick (1988) and Gigliotti (2016) explain, crises provide opportunities for organizations to revision and reinforce key aspects of their identities. Such reflection aids in developing resiliency and managing the anxiety and stress imposed by the crises. Through our workshop, participants will reflect on how their institutions have handled prior crises and consider what can be done to facilitate productive sensemaking. The workshop will assist participants to move beyond the natural impulse toward crisis avoidance and confront the risks facing them, envision the risks they have not considered, and put structures and resources in place to face the unknown.

Gigliotti, R. A. (2016). Leader as performer; leader as human: A discursive and retrospective construction of crisis leadership. *Atlantic Journal of Communication, 24*(4), 185–200.

Weick, K. E. (1988). Enacted sensemaking in crisis situations. *Journal of Management Studies, 25*(4), 305–317.