

EXPLORING THE POSSIBILITIES OF USING “POSITIVE DEVIANCE” FOR ENHANCING CRISIS TRAINING IN MUNICIPALITIES

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ABSTRACT

This study is about using “positive deviance” (Singhal, Buscell, & Lindberg, 2010) regarding more effective crisis training in municipalities. We claim that by using the municipalities own “best practices” and although finding the problem definition, stress the importance of focusing on the solutions found within the municipality, and amplifying these success practices.

This paper will explore the theoretical possibilities that lie in the use of “positive deviance” and present some examples from Norwegian municipalities, where this could have been implemented. The paper will also propose and present a pre-study regarding crisis training in a Norwegian municipality, using “positive deviance” as method for enhanced crisis training.

INTRODUCTION

Crisis training has had an increased focus after one man on the 22nd of July 2011 managed to strike two places with devastating impact, killing a total of 77 people. The returning question of “how could this happen?” is still to be adequately answered, but a commission was established who on the 27th of July 2012 presented a report that concluded that the whole incident should have been avoided. The preparedness should have been better.

As a result of this, there are now issued mandates to all municipalities to train for preparedness. In the municipality of Åmot, in Hedmark County, we have an additional aspect to consider as we are the hosting one of the largest military camps in Norway; Rena Camp, that train soldiers and special forces for combat in war inflicted zones around the world.

All municipalities in Norway have a mandate of having a plan of preparedness((DSB), 2012). Also, since July 2011, substantial resources have been allocated for the purpose of being prepared for crisis. However, the Auditor General, Per Kristian Foss, claims publicly that the preparedness is far from good enough (Carlsen & Sandvik, 2015) (http://www.nrk.no/norge/riksrevisjonen-slar-alarm_-alvorlige-svakheter-ved-norsk-beredskap-1.12371462). He

points to the increased number of exercises that has not seemed to contribute towards the crisis preparedness.

This critique comes after the Gjørsv report (Gjørsv, 2012) that offers a long list of critique for the police department in Norway and the preparedness for terror strikes in general. It is important to point out what could be improved, but will this type of critique boost the organizational learning that is needed or will it seem demotivating(Tone Vold & Thomassen, 2014).

Despite the serious warnings from the Auditor General, we believe that some municipalities still have improved and manage to have at least a partially well-functioning crisis preparedness through emergency exercises. In this paper we explore which parts of the crisis preparedness has proved to function better than others, and propose how this *positive deviance* can be used more extensively in order to improve the total crisis preparedness in a municipality.

Our research question for this project is thus:

How can the positive deviants from previous exercises and incidents be utilized throughout the crisis preparedness plan?

THEORETICAL BACKDROP

Here we briefly present the theory relevant for our study.

Crisis communication and public safety

Public safety is the society’s ability to maintain vital functions in a community and to secure the inhabitants’ lives, health, and basal needs during different constraints, ranging from minor incidents to major crisis ((DSB), 2012).

1st of January 2010 the law on preparedness was changed and increases the responsibility of the municipalities regarding a risk and vulnerability analysis and developing preparedness plans((DSB), 2012). This is followed up by emergency exercises that is planned from the County administration and ranges from table top exercises to emergency exercises involving call out services as well as staff in administrative services.

Results and feedback on the exercises are fed into a computer system (ÅmotKommune, 2015). This enables collecting and sharing of experiences and knowledge.

Positive deviance

Positive Deviance (hereafter called PD) is about exploring the deviants that in spite of different difficulties, such as poverty, difficult neighborhood, or other constraints, they succeed, manage to prevent something, or makes things happen. When all odds are against them, they still find a way of avoid unfortunate situations(Singhal et al., 2010).

Too often we look for the improvement opportunities, focusing on what went wrong, analyzing the situations with a focus on the negative outcome. Using PD is a way of looking at this from a different angle, and rather focus on what actually works and see if we can transfer any behaviors or conditions to the areas that needs improvement. It is about analyzing and singling out the key features of what “works” and working out what of this can be transferred to other areas, and how (Singhal et al., 2010).

The PD process consists of what is called “the four D’s”: define, determine, discover and design. The process has some features that is also found in Action Research(Greenwood & Levin, 2007). These features are bringing the participants into the project and making them the responsible for the development, the process and the outcomes, making sure they are co-producers of the knowledge generated through the project. This bottom up approach will also aid in the process of making the participants responsible and this involvement will secure the participants ownership and loyalty(David R. Marsh, 2004).

Using PD requires time and patience. Sometimes it takes time to find the deviants, and also, to include and involve takes time. However, the potential of the process is vast, and (change) processes that are supported from the top and owned by the organizational members have a better chance of succeeding. PD has mostly been used to solve humanitarian problems. However, used in organizations, the resemblance is close to what eg. Filstad calls “learning organizations” (Filstad, 2010; Filstad & Blåka, 2007). Learning organizations are defined as organizations that: “Acquires knowledge and innovates fast enough to survive and thrive in a rapidly changing environment” (BusinessDictionary.com, 2015) By using PD regarding crisis management, we see the potential for the organization to “create a culture that encourages and supports continuous employee learning, critical thinking, and risk taking with new ideas, allow mistakes and value employee contributions, learn from experience and experiment and disseminate the new knowledge throughout the organization for incorporation into day-to-day activities” (BusinessDictionary.com, 2015).

Adult learning

Being prepared for crisis is also about learning and transfer of knowledge. It is thus important to keep in mind the main features of how learning and knowledge sharing can be facilitated amongst the people in the different organizations.

Learning amongst adults can be facilitated in several ways. In the workplace it is possible to organize what Lave and Wenger calls Communities of Practice(CoP) (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998). CoP’s enables knowledge sharing and transfer through social interaction and common reflection.

Involvement and responsibility for one’s own learning process are also key terms regarding adult learning (Arntzen Bechina & Vold, 2011; Eikeland, 2002; Eikeland & Berg, 1997; Filstad, 2010; Filstad & Blåka, 2007; T Vold, Yildirim, Ree-Lindstad, & Souami, 2010). Creating and supporting engagement and initiatives are also factors that support learning (Keregero, 1989).

Learning through experiencing and using reflection to support the learning process is described in Kolb in his experiential learning cycle (Kolb, 1984). We aim to learn from the experiences that are positive and reflect through analyzing what made the results positive and also on what and how to transfer the positive and successful actions to other situations.

Reflection for learning can be undertaken at many stages(Boud, Keogh, & Walker, 1985). John Cowan suggests reflection an action(2006), and Donald Schön promotes both reflection *during* an action and *after* an action(Schön, 1987, 1991) in order to support the learning process.

Learning from writing down experiences is also valuable. This can be reflective journals or learning journals (Bassot, 2013; Moon, 2004, 2006). Both the writing down and getting feedback on experiences can support the learning process.

METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

Here we will present our methodological approach for this pre-study.

Interview

Since the purpose of the pre-study is to discover and cultivate positive factors contributing towards improved crisis preparedness, we needed to find out what actually worked during emergency exercises and where they could improve. We have not been able to participate in any emergency exercises. In order to establish results from emergency exercises, we have used interview as our research method. This qualitative research method will thus display the *constructed reality* from the exercises they have participated in. This *constructed reality* (Berger & Luckmann, 1966) is interesting to our research as this is their own stories and evaluations of the emergency exercises. From their own experiences we have searched to find and

single out the success factors. We thus rely more on the *credibility* and *transferability* as referred to in Heron (1996, pp. 160,161) more than validity.

The interviews have been semi-structured (Dalen, 2011) and member checks (Guba & Lincoln, 1989) have been done during the data collection process in order to secure the validity and reliability of the data.

When interpreting the data, we have gone through transcripts of the interviews, constructing categories and sub-categories of data, comparing the outcomes and we refer to different statements in the further text to support and exemplify our findings.

Choice of respondents

For this pre-study we have chosen to interview selected leaders in Åmot municipality and the mayors (political leadership) in Åmot and Rendalen municipalities. The selected leaders are responsible for the preparedness plan and have also taken part in the emergency exercises.

RESULTS AND KEY FINDINGS

These are our key findings from our interviews:

Willingness to share experiences

The respondents are positive about sharing their success stories. They came up with several examples of cases that had been handled with a positive outcome. When we explained why we wanted them to share their success stories, they were all surprised about the approach, as they generally were challenged to discuss where their areas of improvement were. To be able to present what they were proud of having achieved, was highly welcomed. This also led to sharing multiple stories, and they all became increasingly clearer in their response to why they had achieved these successes.

The respondents from Åmot municipality presented stories from different incidents and major accidents that had occurred. They were able to give a good picture of the timeline of the incidents and they presented their reflections on why they presented these as success stories.

Below we have highlighted the key findings that the respondents present:

Local knowledge is of essence

Knowing who has what type of tools or facilities can for instance be critical when particular cases are to be solved. For instance; in the major train accident at Åsta (Justis- og beredskapsdepartementet, 2000) the local knowledge and connections the rescue team had with members of Rena Camp (Norwegian Military) facilitated their aid and support faster and without using the ordinary channels. This is also acknowledged by the Ministry of Justice and Public Security in their report from the Åsta accident (Justis- og beredskapsdepartementet, 2000, p. 57).

Also other types of local knowledge are mentioned, such as being able to spot deviant behavior at neighbors. An example from the interview are on lights on late at night in a house where they normally retire early might indicate a need for help, for instance.

Being “small” – easy overview and sense of responsibility

The local knowledge also has another positive side effect; sense of responsibility. The respondents all report on how the administrative staff rises to the occasion and take on responsibility in crisis. One example is during the flood in 1995 in Rena (Thorsnæs, 2015). The home care took care of the area they lived in, even if this was their assigned area. This was neither ordered nor trained on, but was executed throughout the municipality where there was limited access. The reasoning was first and foremost that this was the area they reached, due to the flood. Secondly it was easy for them to establish who needed acute help and who could wait, as they had the local knowledge (their personal friendships and connections).

Participating in developing the plan for crisis preparedness

They all report on the importance of working on developing the plan for crisis preparedness. This is yet a confirmation of the power of participating regarding the learning aspect (Arntzen Bechina & Vold, 2011). *Ownning* the document by being a part of the staff developing the plan, is highlighted. The frequency of having to update it is also reported to be important. Even if this comes as an addition in a very busy work life, all the respondents stress that this has been essential regarding their knowledge, and know how regarding how to act according to this plan.

Using computer system for training

Training is also an addition to a hectic work life. It can also be expensive, as the everyday work tasks still need to be done, and the time spent training for crisis has to be made up for. The major emergency exercises are thus only executed every two years. This is, however, somewhat not enough regarding keeping updated and secure preparedness. It is thus provided “table top” exercises and small scale exercises via a computer system. Here the responsible staff at the County level (here: the County of Hedmark) provide the staff in the local municipalities with different types of scenarios that they have to respond in writing to. The respondents report on conducting shorter meetings in order to collect and form responses to the different scenarios.

The responses are logged in the system and are commented on by the responsible staff at County level. The responses are also distributed in the organization (municipality staff) in meetings where they discuss the feedback they have received from the county. Reflecting using the repository of input and feedback from the system

can prove invaluable regarding the learning process (Arntzen Bechina & Vold, 2007; T Vold, 2011).

Positive deviances for transfer to other crisis'?

The most important finding was the respondents' willingness and ability to see different factors that can be classified as "positive deviances" and how this could be transferred to other situations. One example is the combination of *local knowledge* and *sense of responsibility*. Utilizing the response team members' local knowledge and supporting their sense of responsibility can prove lifesaving efforts in real crisis. This can be tested out in emergency exercises. Some local knowledge can be centralized in a database and in a larger town or area, one could probably have an emergency staff, that could access necessary knowledge. However, this would mean extra time and the ability to connect and act on different or even deviant information.

Another example is the respondents' ability to see the value of reflection regarding experiences and feedback in the computer system. Utilizing this factor we believe is key to handling future crisis. Drawing on their experiences and reflections from written and active exercises, and discussing them in retrospect is invaluable. This is also similar to what Faul and Camacho has introduced as "Retrospect" (Faul & Camacho, 2004), where an evaluation of a project or task is undertaken in order to find the success factors, and how these can be used this for future projects.

CONCLUSION

The main conclusions from our interviews are thus that extensive local knowledge provides an opportunity for swifter and more accurate help during crisis.

Focusing on the positive and successful stories from emergencies was welcomed by the respondents and they saw several factors that were transferable to other and different crisis.

The preparedness in the municipalities is supported by the learning facilitated and provided by emergency exercises and the exercises provided in computer system with the feedback from the county level.

Involvement and participation in the development and continuous updating of the emergency preparedness plans are key contributions towards the preparedness.

Extensive use of reflection in different stages (before, during, after and longer after action) supports the learning process and contributes towards the preparedness.

Further research

Based on the findings and what we conclude on, we are planning the major study drilling deeper into the matter, using our experiences from the data collection and the leaders' experiences from the emergency exercises, to prepare for a coming emergency exercise, expanding the use

of the positive deviances mentioned above. During the preparation, we will facilitate reflection processes that will prepare the participants for the action (Cowan, 2006) and focus on the *positive deviances* that we have found here, and also encourage the emergence of more *positive deviances* to test out during emergency exercises. We will facilitate for reflection processes during and after (Schön, 1987, 1991; von der Oelsnitz & Busch, 2006).

Also to utilize the reflections regarding previous exercises and feedback will be supported and focused on as a *positive deviance*, as there is a lot of learning potential in this type of reflection (Bassot, 2013; Moon, 2006).

The main focus will be combining the use of PD processes with the knowledge of how to create sustainability in learning organizations with regards to crisis preparedness.

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