

Gheorghe-Ilie FÂRTE

"Al.I.Cuza" University of Iași (Romania)

## Emotion Management in Crisis Situations

**Abstract:** In this paper I try to clarify and systematize some contributions with regard to (a) the main aspects of crisis situations that impose the management of emotions, (b) the correlation of certain social emotions with the factors that trigger them and their related tendencies to act, (c) the essential elements of emotional experience, (d) the differentiation of appropriate emotional reactions to a crisis situation from the inappropriate ones; (e) the instances in which emotions can be managed, and (f) the balance between rationality and affectivity in the organization's response to the risks or crises which it faces. By means of logical correlations I arrived at the following conclusions. Regardless of the social sphere in which the crisis makes itself felt, regardless of its type, phase or damage control strategies, the rational control of emotions contributes significantly to overcoming the crisis situation. Beyond the specificities, crises involve digressions from the norms of rightful conduct, breaches of the social norms that support institutions (as spontaneous order structures) and maladaptive reactions to reality. They can be corrected through a good management of emotions, with the caveat that we are not dealing with a problem of knowledge, but rather with one of will and character. All people can identify the adaptive emotional responses to a crisis situation, but only a few prefer them and train assiduously to use them.

**Keywords:** crisis, (social) emotion, norm, rightful conduct, adaptive vs. maladaptive reaction

### 1. Introduction

In any period of history, the life of any human society depends on the dialectic relationship between its institutions and its organizations. Institutions are *spontaneous* order structures resulting from the voluntary activities of individuals interested in reaching personal goals (Hayek 1968, 11). These by-products of individual actions respond to certain social

needs, but they are not intentionally created by planning. Spontaneous order structures can neither be known, nor controlled completely, but anyone can understand their essential aspects and use their resources (Easterly 2011). For instance, no-one can fully master institutions such as language, the market, marriage, school, spiritual guidance, entrepreneurship or risk insurance (in cases of death, illness, accident, fire, etc.), whereas anyone can be usefully trained at a given point in time during their lives. By contrast, organizations are *planned* order structures in which each constitutive factor is assigned certain tasks and resources with a view to the completion of certain goals (Hayek 1968, 11). The performance and even survival of organizations depend on their degree of adequacy to the regulatory principles, systemic resources, fundamental values and retroactions that define the corresponding institutions (Fârte 2012, 9). For instance, my family, the “Emil Racoviță” National College of Iași, the Orthodox Romanian Church and the Commercial Romanian Bank cannot accomplish their planned goals nor last in time unless the essential aspects of marriage, school, spiritual guidance, entrepreneurship and the market are understood and fructified. Obviously, institutions are not immutable, but they evolve permanently under the influence of the organizations that embody them, but also under that of the *flux of emotion* that sustains the subjacent social norms. The flexibility and heterogeneity of marriage or the social responsibility incorporated in the institution of entrepreneurship are conclusive examples in this respect.

The hayekian distinction between ‘institution’ and ‘organisation’ allows us, on the one hand, to highlight the limits of planning and controlling in the managerial act, and on the other, to underline the importance of the emotional dimension in the life of any organisation, especially in the management of crisis situations. So as not to be accused of ‘emotional anorexia’ (especially in the context of cutbacks and significant personnel lay-offs or of crises that question the legitimacy of their existence), organisations (mostly companies) show interest in the emotional dimension of social interaction, through appealing phrasings of their mission and vision, the cultivation of their brand personality, the counselling or training of employees, client relationship management, etc. Unfortunately, these often fall prey to the pitfall of ‘marketization’ and the instrumentalization of emotions, i.e. the transformation of emotions into products that can be sold, bought and used as means of reaching purposes (Fineman 2000, 102). However, the management of emotional reactions does not only (and firstly) target the instrumentalization of emotions, but their correlation with the *rules of rightful behaviour*. Crisis

situations can be successfully prevented or overcome if the efforts directed at the accomplishment of planned purposes are subordinated to the social norms that define the right behaviour, while the emotions represent excellent indicators of the adequacy/inadequacy of such standards. In the following, we propose to clarify and systematize some contributions in the following directions: (a) the knowledge of the main aspects of crisis situations that impose the management of emotions; (b) the differentiation of certain social emotions according to the factors that trigger them and their related tendencies to act; (c) the knowledge of the essential elements of emotional experience; (d) the differentiation of appropriate emotional reactions to a crisis situation from the inappropriate ones; (e) the knowledge of the instances in which emotions can be managed: recognition, expression and guidance; (f) the understanding of the balance between rationality and affectivity in the organization's response to the risks or crises which it faces.

## **2. Are crisis situations (un)avoidable?**

Humans are imperfect beings living in an imperfect world or, at least, in a world that does not correspond to their needs, wishes, preferences or whims perfectly. Their beliefs and wishes, as mental representations of things as they ought to be (Griffiths 2004, 246), condemn them to a permanent succession of changes on the level of both their own persons and that of the environment in which they live. We only have a partial and, sometimes, erroneous knowledge of the circumstances in which we want to act and seek, most often, to satisfy unrealizable wishes (due to their contradictory nature).

As part of a very competitive environment, organizations (companies, in particular) focus their attention and resources on obtaining results, ignoring the fact that all cause entails, aside from the immediate intended effect, several series of consequences, most of which unknown and unintentional. Therefore, it is not surprising that all companies reach a point where they face unexpected events, often highly profiled in the media, which unsettle their current activities or even question their existence, demanding that important decisions (of allocating scarce resources) be taken under strong temporal pressure. These (unavoidable) events form the extremely heterogeneous category of *crises* (cf. Coman 2009, 13-32).

The social phenomenon of crisis has received copious treatment in scholarship. The contributions of reputed authors such as Ian I. Mitroff (1987), William L. Benoit (1997), John J. Burnett (1998), W. Timothy

Coombs (2004) or Cristina Coman (2009) outline an accurate view on crises concerning definitions, the factors that trigger them, types, analysis models, evolution stages, crisis management plans and crisis communication strategies.

Deeming the analytic survey of the aforementioned contributions unnecessary, we note, in the context of the discussed topic – the management of emotions in crisis situations – only a few succinct data. First and foremost, one must take note of the fact that each crisis implies (a) change<sup>1</sup>, (b) disruption or blockage, (c) excessive and unwanted visibility (or mediatization) (d) scarcity of resources (of time, particularly), (e) uncertainty/ vulnerability and (f) vital decision-making under pressure. Crises can be triggered by factors from within the organization or by certain factors from the environment, such as human/social/organizational or techno-economical factors. Crisis situations can be ranked and ordered according to several criteria: (a) the degree of danger, (b) the degree of probability, (c) the level of temporal pressure (d) the degree of control over the situation, (e) the number of possible answers to requests from the environment, (f) the presence vs. absence of the intentional dimension, (g) the scale of the impact on the organization etc. (The identification of crisis types allows the efficient allocation of the resources and the fair attribution of responsibilities for the occurrence of crisis situations). The crisis, as well as the crisis management process, comprises several stages. Thus, it is agreed that a crisis successively passes through (a) the incubation phase, (b) the acute phase (c) the chronic phase and (d) the closure phase. On the other hand, the crisis management process would entail the stages of (a) research/ diagnosis/ scanning/ detection, (b) prevention (where possible), (c) control/ planning and objective implementation, (d) return to ‘normal’ and (e) assessment/ learning/ drawing of useful conclusions for the future. Finally, crisis communication is regarded as synthesis of the following discursive strategies: (a) *denial* (denial proper and blaming a third party), (b) *evasion of responsibility* (presenting the action as a response to a challenge, underlining the lack of information or skills, claiming to have been unable to control all environmental parameters, alleging hazard or bad luck and highlighting good intentions), (c) *diminishing the negative nature of the action* (stressing the positive features, minimizing the negative effects, discriminating from other congeneric actions, approaching the problem

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<sup>1</sup> Often, current activities and the very existence of an organization are jeopardized by a *mood* rather than an event. However, in the acute phase (when the crisis is acknowledged) the crisis situation is correlated with a triggering event.

from a superior plane, attacking the opposite camp and compensation), (d) *correction* (re-establishing the initial state of things and adoption of a preventive attitude) and (e) *mortification* (the organization confesses its mistake and apologizes to the public).

Entirely justified from a managerial point of view, the aforementioned contributions attribute quite a low importance to the emotional charge of crisis situations. In all fairness, the strategies particular to crisis communication implicitly lead to certain emotions, suggesting their instrumentalization with a view to overcoming the crisis. For instance, the victim compensation strategy supposes compassion, while the mortification strategy, guilt and regret. The emotional terms of the crisis situation, however, deserve a much more analytical approach. If the emotional factors are strategically used only for satisfying one's own interests and if the emotions of the other involved individuals are ignored or disregarded, the crisis situation is not defused, but, on the contrary, is prolonged (often under hidden forms). The most important thing at stake is the identification and management of emotions that signal the observance or the breach of the rules that define the rightful behaviour (in the eyes of the parties involved). The proximity to the rules of rightful behaviour – by countless trials and errors, obviously – constitutes, from our point of view, the royal path to overcoming crisis situations.

### **3. Emotions as a means of supporting social norms**

First and foremost, to prevent entering futile distinctions that would make the sophist Prodicos envious, we acknowledge the synonymy of the terms that form the cluster of affective concepts: emotion, passion, feeling, affect and sentiment. Obviously, each term bears a specific connotation, referring, in turn, to the motive that prompts someone to undertake action, to fervour and lack of self-control, to awareness of a sensation, to change and finally, cognitive attitudes (Rorty 2004, 270). Acceptation notwithstanding, we can agree with Alan Turing and Geoffrey Jefferson that emotional experience is a defining criterion that helps distinguish the human being from the machines capable of performing related cognitive tasks. Thus, no machine can experience the pleasure of success, the bitterness of failure, the warmth of praise, the shame of error, the anger or depression caused by the inability to obtain the wished-for thing etc. (Sabini 1998, 4). Emotions are correlated with the individual's convictions, wishes, goals, preoccupations and values (cf. Sabini 1998, 14). They represent the fundamental and universal survival

kit of vulnerable species, whose existence depends on the maintenance of a fragile balance between the hierarchically constituted power, the mutual dependence between individuals and the relationship of (mis)trust manifest within the species (Rorty 2004, 276).

In a similar way to other (human) behaviors, emotions are reactions to certain factors or stimuli. Their specificity is ensured by the following essential traits (Griffiths 2004, 242-244; Rorty 2004, 270-276; Bennett and Bennett 2011):

- Emotions provide a *first* judgment of assessment or appreciation, be it unconscious, involuntary, hasty, incomplete or mistaken;
- Emotions draw our attention to certain aspects that are very important for our safety and personal welfare;
- Emotions are accompanied by certain physiological changes: accelerated pulse, high blood pressure, panting, pallor etc;
- Emotions are simpler than cognitive reactions, but more complex than tropisms, reflexes and homeostatic reactions;
- As long as the will is not involved, emotions cannot be considered either good or bad. They are provided with a moral aspect only when we *choose* to respond in a certain way when we become aware of them;
- Through emotions we have an intuition of good and a suspicion of evil. Emotions motivate us to seek good and avoid evil;
- Emotions cannot be neither eradicated, nor fully controlled, but they can be *guided* through the use of reason and will;
- Emotions can blind the intellect and debilitate the will ;
- As a part of our genetically inherited constitution, our temperament significantly influences our emotional reactions.

As we can ascertain, emotions are evasive and ambivalent in nature. They rarely appear isolated and, very often, morph into something different, sometimes their opposites. A stimulus from the environment can trigger different emotional reactions even in the case of the same individual. For this reason it is very difficult to outline a precise and complete picture of human emotions and all the more difficult to pinpoint an infallible mechanism to manage them.

From the wealth of human affects, in the context of crisis situations it is worth taking note of social emotions, i.e. emotional reactions to persons who observe and break the social norms. Jon Elster (2004, 152; 2007, 98-99) has surveyed 11 such emotions – arrogance, affection, pride, admiration, gratitude, shame, contempt, hatred, guilt, anger and (Cartesian) indignation – which he correlated with their triggers, as well as the action tendencies they entailed:

*The table of social emotions after Jon Elster*

<b>Emotion</b>	<b>Trigger</b>	<b>Action tendencies</b>
<i>Arrogance</i>	A person assesses their own character positively.	Looking down on others.
<i>Affection</i>	A person assesses somebody else's character positively.	Closeness, efforts are made to ingratiate oneself with the liked person.
<i>Pride</i>	A person assesses their own character positively.	(Moderate) self-praise, encouraging the receipt of praise from others.
<i>Gratitude</i>	A person assesses somebody else's behavior towards them positively.	Direct or indirect reciprocity.
<i>Admiration</i>	A person assesses somebody else's behavior towards a third party positively.	Praising the person that is the object of admiration.
<i>Shame</i>	A person assesses their own character negatively.	Isolation, withdrawal from peers, suicide.
<i>Contempt</i>	A person assesses somebody else's character negatively, deeming it inferior.	Ostracization, avoidance.
<i>Hatred</i>	A person assesses somebody else's character negatively, deeming it (intrinsically) bad.	The physical removal of the hated person, the destruction of his or her reputation.
<i>Guilt</i>	A person assesses their own behavior negatively.	Self-punishment, confession, fixing the mistake.
<i>Anger</i>	A person assesses somebody else's behavior to himself or herself negatively.	Revenge (applying the 'eye for an eye' law)
<i>Indignation</i>	A person assesses somebody else's behavior to a third party negatively.	Punishing the person that harms their peers.

To these social emotions, *envy* and *jealousy* could be added. Envy occurs when a person assesses that somebody else owns an object that he/she themselves desire (and that he/she will probably never have) and generates the tendency to destroy the envied object (in accordance to the 'sour grapes' saying). Jealousy is experienced by a person who suspects somebody is trying to deprive him/her of a personal asset. The jealous person tends to eliminate the suspected person or to destroy the asset that he/she risks losing.

All these social emotions can be easily identified in the media. In very many cases, they have had serious consequences for the persons and organizations that mismanaged them. For instance, very likely because of arrogance, former Prime Minister Gordon Brown labelled a British voter<sup>2</sup> a ‘bigot’, while president of Uruguay Jose Mujica called Cristina Kirchner, the president of Argentina,<sup>3</sup> an ‘old hag’. Mass-media provides evident testimonies of affection and admiration towards Pope Francis<sup>4</sup> and of contempt or hatred towards Traian Băsescu<sup>5</sup>. Former New York governor Eliot Spitzer experienced strong feelings of shame and guilt following his involvement in a prostitution scandal<sup>6</sup>, while citizens involved in the ‘Occupy Wall Street’<sup>7</sup> and ‘Los indignados’<sup>8</sup> movements loudly manifested their feelings of anger, hatred and indignation in the public space. In each of these cases, the negative emotions were directly correlated with the unfolding of a crisis.

#### 4. The essential components of an emotional crisis

In an excellent article published in the *Management Communication Quarterly – A Framework for the Study of Emotions in Organizational Contexts* magazine – Greg Fiebig and Michael Kramer (1998, 537-544) provide us with a precise description of the main components of the emotional experience: (a) expectations, (b) catalysts, (c) awareness, (d) emotion management, (e) communication behavior and (f) impact.

The first component – expectations – reunites *personal* and organizational expectations. Personal expectations are shaped by the parental influence, by socialization practices during childhood, by the assignation of tasks in the family etc. and regard the initiation, the maintenance, the modification and the breaking of social relations, the means of task completion, behavior in work relations etc. Organizational expectations are fixed to the prescribed roles by the employer, roles that

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/election/article-1269486/Election-2010-Gordon-brows-bigoted-woman-insult-Gillian-Duffy.html>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.dcnews.ro/2013/04/gafa-uriasa-vezi-cine-a-numit-o-pe-lidera-argentinei-hoasca-batrana/>

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.thespec.com/news-story/3240715-do-you-have-the-face-of-pope-francis/>

<sup>5</sup> [http://adevarul.ro/news/politica/antonescu-nu-simt-ura-traian-basescu-mai-repede-dispret-respingere-1\\_50aebd6f7c42d5a6639fc74b/index.html](http://adevarul.ro/news/politica/antonescu-nu-simt-ura-traian-basescu-mai-repede-dispret-respingere-1_50aebd6f7c42d5a6639fc74b/index.html)

<sup>6</sup> <http://prawfsblawg.blogs.com/prawfsblawg/2008/03/the-shame-of-el.html>

<sup>7</sup> <http://occupywallst.org/>

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2013/apr/28/spain-indignados-protests-state-of-mind>



often limit the range of emotional expressions of employees. (For instance, a necessary condition for the filling of the position of flight attendant is the ability to remain calm during incidents).

The catalysts of emotional experiences are the discrepancies that occur between the expectations (personal or organizational) and the experience of the persons concerned proper. Any event can play the part of catalyst of an emotional experience, as long as each of us are simultaneously preoccupied with several aspects and follows multiple goals at the same time. No event can satisfy all our expectations.

Of the discrepancies between expectations and reality, some go unnoticed, while others move us at the physiological and cognitive level. The physiological or cognitive modifications are recognized as the manifestation of the presence of emotions. The stronger is an emotion felt, the more probable is its expression. The lack of energy entails a disorderly expression of emotions or, on the contrary, their internalization (in other words, 'privatization'). In an organizational context, employees are encouraged to internalize *adequate* expression norms of their emotions.

By means of semiotic behaviors, people with an emotional experience can choose to sincerely express or to dissemble/ hide their true feelings. Obviously, performance in the communication of emotions is determined by the individual's ability to recognize and verbalize these emotions.

The emotional experience is completed by the retroactive loop which consolidates or, conversely, modifies expectations and, consequently, all other components of the affective process. One must note that the emotional experience is not linear. Often, there are gaps in passing from one component to another and, even more often, there is disproportion between accumulations of events and effects. For instance, an employee can stand the overcharging of his job description and salary cuts without a problem, but not having to move from one office to another.

## **5. Adaptive vs. maladaptive emotional responses**

Generally, all moderate emotions that bring value to our lives, creating a mood of well-being, can be considered adaptive. On the contrary, all excessively intense emotional reactions, which debilitate our personality in the long run, can be termed maladaptive. As a rule, a maladaptive response is a clue that something needs to be rectified either in the environment, or in the person's inner structure (Bennett and Bennett 2011). Moreover, it signals a deviation from the 'rules of rightful

behavior' ('to each their own'). Adaptive and maladaptive emotions can be discerned by integrating the answers to the following questions (Bennett and Bennett 2011):

- Does the emotional response correspond to the current situation, or was my response too weak or too strong?
- Does the emotional reaction help me cope with the situation, or is it rather an impediment or an obstacle?
- Does the emotional response affect my liberty of will and self-control?
- Are there, in the situation I am dealing with, sources of irritation that replay unpleasant feelings from the past and make me react excessively?
- Does my emotional response provide an accurate signal of what I feel towards others, or does it occasion their confusion and rejection?
- Am I capable of adjusting my emotions, as well as their forms of expression so that they fit the current situation?
- Do I feel burdened and overwhelmed by my emotions and moods? If I am sad, can the others console me?
- Do I feel entangled in the web of my own emotions, incapable of expressing them or of making a decision?
- Do I experience more often and more intensely emotions that are positive, or rather negative?

Given that emotions (a) help us orient in accordance with the rules of rightful behaviour (b) support social norms (c) outline the spontaneous order structures (i.e. social institutions), it seems logical to assume the fact that their recognition, expression and guidance are commonsensical rather than at the level of 'experts in emotional intelligence'. Indeed, reasonable persons (i.e. persons who submit their emotions to reason) dispose of the necessary competence to distinguish and correct maladaptive emotional responses, even during crisis situations. Thus, if we take into account the control questions mentioned above, it is reasonable to catalogue as maladaptive the emotions that (a) appear disproportionate, (b) paralyze or obstruct action, (c) prevent the person from coping with the situation, (d) annihilate or debilitate free will, (e) inflate by contagion with negative emotions from the past, (f) create confusion or rejection in other persons, (g) reject adjustment or adaptation to the context, (h) burden the conscience, (i) are difficult to express and even more difficult to vent in pro-social action and (j) are essentially negative. Once known, they can be avoided or counteracted. (The virtues could be seen as adaptive responses to maladaptive emotional responses, but this is a separate research topic).

## 6. Conclusions

Regardless of the social sphere in which the crisis makes itself felt, regardless of its type, phase or damage control strategies, the rational control of emotions contributes significantly to overcoming the crisis situation. Beyond the specificities, crises involve digressions from the norms of rightful conduct, breaches of the social norms that support institutions (as spontaneous order structures) and maladaptive reactions to reality. They can be corrected through a good management of emotions, with the caveat that we are not dealing with a problem of knowledge, but rather with one of will and character. All people can identify the adaptive emotional responses to a crisis situation, but only a few prefer them and train assiduously to use them.

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