

Innovative ways of dealing with unforeseen events

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Dorothy Sutherland Olsen and Lisa Scordato from the Nordic Institute for Studies of innovation, research and education, explore innovative ways of dealing with unforeseen events

Increasing interest in the challenges experienced by public and private organisations when unforeseen events occur, has prompted a research project looking into potential ways of developing relevant competence to deal with such events. The project has been inspired by earlier studies on innovation where change is seen, not only as a challenge, but also as an opportunity.

Unforeseen events have always been around, ready to disrupt everyday routines in organisations. These events are not always completely unforeseen, but the scale is often unknown, and we can rarely predict exactly when these events might occur. These events can be pandemics, terror incidents or natural catastrophes; they can also be new technologies, new green ways of working or perhaps more local events like an employee leaving confidential documents on the bus or a construction team dropping a six-tonne oil installation. All these events require a rapid response; speed is of the essence, and errors and delays must be avoided.

Using innovation studies to understand unforeseen events

Emergency workers are usually trained to respond to whatever the threat is, but many other people working in the public and private sectors are perhaps less familiar with such events. [The Nordic Institute for Studies in innovation, research and education \(NIFU\)](#) has initiated a research project to look more closely at these events. NIFU has expertise on innovation and transformative change and we use theories of innovation to find new ways for organisations to visualise unforeseen events and find novel ways of dealing with them. NIFU has partnered with [the University of South-Eastern Norway \(USN\)](#), who have been working on educational concepts to help the military and other organisations develop the necessary competence to deal with unforeseen events.

Are standard procedures cementing our thinking?

One of the challenges identified is the importance organisations place upon standard procedures. This attention to rules and fixed routines permeates much of the public sector, and managers are typically promoted based on their ability to follow standards and adhere to existing practice. One of the findings of this project is that organisations which encourage trial and error and attempt to learn from their errors are better prepared for unforeseen events.

Formal and informal learning

While courses and information on potential risks are an important part of preparing for the unforeseen, data is emerging, which suggests that alternative forms of learning may provide a valuable contribution. The ability to find creative solutions, the ability to find the right people with the right expertise, and the ability to visualise not just one future but multiple, alternative futures all seem to be vital in building an organisation that can work in a productive way to develop new solutions in a turbulent situation.

People are telling us that they have called upon their personal network of contacts to find the right expertise. Many have used skills developed outside the workplace, and it is becoming evident that managers really need to be aware of these abilities among their employees. We have also had reports that some of the most unexpected people have come up with the best solutions in a crisis.

The project has a PhD student who is working on in-depth case studies in the public sector in Norway and Italy. Here she describes her work and some of the findings:

Challenges for the public sector

When public sector employees face large-scale crises like the COVID-19 pandemic, extreme weather events, or refugee emergencies, their ability to improvise becomes crucial. Often, there isn't a clear playbook, or the existing ones may fall short when unexpected challenges arise. Crisis management is a key responsibility of public administrations, but these situations frequently push the boundaries of what these organisations are designed to handle.

Improvisation doesn't mean starting from scratch. In research, improvisation is often seen as "planning in action," relying on existing resources and real-time problem-solving. This concept is similar to how jazz musicians or improv actors perform – while their actions seem spontaneous, they are rooted in extensive training, knowledge, and practice.

Pre-crisis planning is, therefore, vital, as it sets the stage for effective improvisation during emergencies. Success in these situations depends on the conditions and practices established before the crisis hits. Key resources like social relationships, team dynamics, and experience are essential for effective crisis management.

This means public managers need to be skilled in conflict resolution and fostering positive relationships among staff. Building a supportive and inclusive organisational culture is also critical.

Additionally, public managers should focus on promoting trust, open communication and a sense of shared purpose among employees. Finally, it's essential to prioritise systematic training within and across agencies. This training should help teams anticipate and imagine potential future scenarios, making them better prepared for the unexpected.

Balance between planning and improvisation

The need to balance contingency planning with improvisation is particularly crucial in climate disaster response. The catastrophic flood that struck the Emilia-Romagna region in northern Italy in May 2023 serves as a compelling case study. Existing plans were not calibrated to handle the scale of the emergency. Heavy rains followed several months of severe drought, resulting in devastating flooding and landslides. While extreme rainfall in this area is not a new phenomenon, the 2023 flood introduced new challenges that required unplanned responses.

This case underscores the importance of adaptable crisis management strategies in an era of increasingly unpredictable and severe climate events. As the impacts of climate change intensify, traditional plans may increasingly fall short. Therefore, the ability to improvise, combined with robust pre-crisis planning, is not just beneficial – it's essential.

We hope that our findings will make it possible for managers to design various forms of practice-based training to support them when unforeseen events occur in the future.

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