

Change Management

Exercise: Turning Crisis into Opportunity

Description

This is an activity that examines emotional reaction to a crisis, identifies the opportunities presented, and creates a constructive action plan.

Situations

This can be used for an organizational problem, which at the outset, appears to be a crisis. Examples of these might be

- impending takeover;
- substantial loss of business;
- numerous layoffs;
- failure to recruit key staff;
- a strike or other form of industrial action;
- complete failure to communicate a mission statement;
- lack of co-operation between work groups;
- serious cash-flow problems.

Alternatively, this activity could be adapted to a crisis faced by an individual. The process would be slightly different and the steps are outlined in the Method. In such cases, support for the individual experiencing the crisis would come from another person (the manager or possibly the trainer in some situations) rather than a group.

Objectives

- To provide an opportunity for release and expression of emotions at a time of crisis.
- To acknowledge the positive aspects of change arising from difficult situations.
- To identify difficulties/obstacles facing the group/individual.
- To produce an action plan “in defiance of” the crisis.

Trainer guidance

Your principal role is as a facilitator. You should encourage trust and openness, particularly in the early stages of the activity when a willingness to express real feelings will contribute to the process of making changes happen in what could be difficult and even traumatic circumstances.

Method

Working with a group

1. *Crisis definition.* Working with participants, define the crisis. This should result in an unambiguous statement which concentrates on the problem itself rather than why it has occurred.

2. *Summary of feelings.* Divide participants into pairs or small groups and ask them to discuss their response to the crisis. It is important that both negative and positive feelings are aired. Ask questions such as:

- What does this situation mean to *you*?
- What are the words that express your feelings?
- How did you feel when first faced with this crisis?
- How do you feel at this moment?

Bring participants together and produce a list of key words that cover the range of emotions, displaying them on a flipchart. Allow time for discussion to explore different individual reactions.

3. *Definition of the qualities of the team.* This stage begins to translate feelings into positive action. Typical statements could be:

- OK to have negative feelings initially.
- The crisis may present opportunities to the individual and the team.
- Focusing on the positive helps the team to move away from the crisis.

Ask participants to return to their pairs or small groups to summarize the strengths of each participant.

This stage is working toward the conclusion that: "We may feel downcast but now that we have thought about it there is much we can contribute to this crisis situation."

4. *Brainstorm the crisis.* Bring together participants and remind them of the statement agreed at step 1. Ask them to suggest as many ideas as they can relative to the crisis, all of which are recorded without discussion. These can then be categorized into "very useful" or "potentially useful."

5. *Review of the options.* Making use of the material from the brainstorming session, discuss the options open to the participants:

- a. Our most favored course of action is...
- b. The course of action we find acceptable is...
- c. Our least favored course of action (but still just acceptable) is...

6. *Agreement on course of action.* Produce an action plan in the form of a statement that details

- who is to do what;
- when;
- how;
- resources required;
- who can provide support and assistance;
- means of evaluation.

7. *Evaluation of crisis exercise.* Evaluate reactions to the activity:

- What have we learned?
- What might we use again?
- What do we now think about a crisis?

Working with an individual

The steps are similar and should be followed as above, taking into consideration the following:

1. Work with a partner to clarify the crisis and explore feelings.
2. Identify individual qualities and strengths and discuss with a partner.
3. Share key questions with a partner. For example:
 - What are my options?
 - What are some of the limiting factors?
 - Who can give me support?
4. Produce a personal action plan as a contract with a partner.
5. Perform a periodic review of the action plan.