

EXPATRIATES IN POLITICAL CRISIS: A WEBSITE

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Abstract: With the rise in the profile of terrorism and war since the September 11th terrorist attack, the Bali, Turkish and Madrid bombings, organisational stress has reached new heights. Companies have subsequently realised the need to provide more resources for their expatriate employees. A few companies are now developing online resources to help employees through these crises. The researcher sought to extend this approach by developing a trial Website for expatriates employees and their families that draws on the concept of 'Storytelling' as a form of 'Narrative Therapy'. The aim is to help expatriates and their families cope with the crisis by being able to share similar experiences, and further to provide them with links to useful resources to help them cope with the situation. This study began with the researcher reflecting on their own family experiences during the Libyan Revolution and then collecting stories from others who have shared similar experiences. This is a research in progress paper, and deals with the development of the concept and then a trial Website, which will be tested in subsequent research.

1 INTRODUCTION

In 2001, a new form of organisational stress has grabbed the headlines, it is the stress caused by 'war' and 'terrorism' (Jupp 2003). This stress becomes a crisis when an individual feels they are helpless. Terrorism has now made its way into countries were traditionally considered safe, such as American, nevertheless those most at risk are an organisation's expatriate employees. These people are in an unfamiliar country where often their sole support in an emergency is the planning and intervention their company provides. This research is based around the development of an trial Website site to support these expatriate workers and their families. As such the research question was posed:

How can online Internet resources be used to aid expatriate families in a political crisis?

This research question was addressed by taking a post-modern approach, as the issue deals with

social transformation of individual humans in a vulnerable social situation. The author used their

own 'life history' to explore the use of Internet resources (Beverley, 2000). They collected other expatriates crises stories, these took multiple art forms and were used as the foundation for the trial Website. The researcher also reviewed other online resources for political crisis currently available on the Internet and used these to form categories for the trial Website of: children, parents, general information on the psychology of crisis and group discussion.

This paper will firstly review the literature on organisational crisis in war and terrorist situations and then it will explore how the psychology literature on how to help cope people with such crises. Then there will be a description of the actual method used to develop a trial Website to help expatriates in a crisis.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

Political crisis for expatriate employees and their families has heightened after the September 11th the Bali, Turkish and Madrid bombings. The review will look at what crisis is, how families, in particular their children, can be helped to cope with these situations, how organisations can use Internet resources to better aid their expatriate employees

families during these crisis and why storytelling is a suitable tool to achieve this aim.

1.1 Stress and Crisis

To understand the concept of crisis, we firstly need to consider how it differs from the related concept of stress. We tend to think of the word stress as a negative context but stress is an important part of being human, it can be brought on by both good and bad events, as such it is a neutral phenomenon (Robbins, 1984; Robbins, 2003). Stress has had an important role to play in human evolution, as it was used to escape danger. In today's organisation people are now experiencing continual stress due to job related factors. However there is a high cost for this state, the chemical produced for fright or flight can damage the body so a continued state of stress is not desirable (Kreitner & Kinicki, 1992). This can result in people experiencing physical and mental symptoms, such as heart attacks and depression. In today's world organisational stress is defined as follows (Kreitner & Kinicki, 1992):

Stress is a period of time when we have the opportunity to develop more, accomplish more. We function on less sleep, work efficiently and survive without support. In the best case we accomplish things we did not think we could do. However it can result in negative side effects, such as tension and anxiety. To solve them we seek information from our organization, family or friends.

Crisis although related to stress, is an alternative state that it is reached when a person is unable to cope with a stressful situation, that they are shocked by it and become numb and do not know how to move on, as Kfir (1989) explains:

Crisis is a situation that is new to you, the cause seems unpredictable and you feel mentally paralysed, and the crisis poses a shock to your psychological system. A crisis catches you unaware and you have not had time to prepare and plan a response.

Crisis is an individual phenomenon that some people will be affected by in a given situation and other will not. Kfir, (1989), discovered three main reasons for this. Firstly it depends on what you considered important for mental stability, there are four categories: control, pleasing, avoidance and moral superiority. If these are removed then often it can result in crisis for a person. Secondly if you have a

history of unresolved trauma you are more likely to go into crisis if another event occurs. Lastly some people need to maintain a balance in life, however life is not like this and events will always happen that we need to adapt too, ignoring changes can lead to psychological problems.

1.2 Children and War

Children are the most vulnerable psychologically to trauma, and for expatriate families helping children through these situations would be a primary concern. As such, research on children and war was used to understand better the types of help that a family would require.

Research from children in war zones, such as, Bosnia, Croatia, Ireland and Israel revealed what were the most trauma events for children (McNew, & Abell, 1995; Goldstein, Wampler & Wise, 1997; Ajdukovic, 1998; Husain, Nair, Holcomb & Reid, 1998; Campbell, & Demi, 2000). Ironically one of the most traumatic events a child can suffer amongst death of a parent or witness to violence was the 'loss of home'. These children developed the condition of post traumatic stress syndrome (PTSD), however there are the exceptions, children who manage to struggle through these situations and achieve success in later life despite these traumatic experiences. It is the information on how to achieve such an outcome that would be important to supply an organisations expatriates, and hence to help them reduce the chance of PTSD.

Klingman (2003) explains in a book about the effects of war and terrorism on children, how children can escape PTSD. What gets these children through is a phenomenon called a 'coping strategy'. In a crisis children naturally a find way to cope, however where things go wrong is when a child relies on only one coping strategy and they need to find a variety of strategies to balance out the trauma. There is a saying, "fighting a war on all fronts" and this is what coping is about, having a variety of methods at hand.

Studies showed that even the smallest child has coping strategies, a toddler in a fall out shelters in Israel made jokes to make their parents laugh (Klingman, 2003). This example demonstrates two strategies, humour and caring for someone else. Other coping strategies are becoming detached or the reverse, becoming clingy. One of the most

important strategies is called continuity. This is where parents, extended family and local community can help keep a sense of routine going, despite the changes (Klingman, 2003; Kfir, 1989).

Linking this research back to the paper on Bosnian children, it can be seen why the loss of their home that was most devastating, this represented a loss in continuity. Israel had led the way in creating therapy that works on restoring continuity to families. One story is of a family whose house was taken over by terrorists, the children were scared to go back, so they started having meals in the 'safe parts' of the house, in the guise that the therapist was hungry and lived a long way away so needed to eat. By re-establishing family eating routines the children began to feel safe in their house. A year later and the family were living back in the house and functioning well (Kfir, 1989).

As we can see from this example family and community are important to continuity, it is how we feel safe. The challenge for a company is how to establish such a community when members of the organisation may be locked in their houses under a curfew. How can they get sympathy, empathy from other human beings when they are frightened to walk down the street? How do they get support of their family when they are millions of miles away?

The next section will look at different forms of storytelling that are used as forms of therapy for families in crisis.

1.3 Storytelling

Storytelling has powerful transformative abilities, in particular it holds great strength for people connecting in a crisis situation. Storytelling is used now as a therapeutic tool by psychologists. David Epston and Michael White (1992) have been founders of this approach known as 'narrative therapy'. Storytelling has also become an accepted form of organisational tool, and has most recently been seen in its use for helping companies through organisational change (Boyce, 1996). However the researcher saw the potential for organisations to use it to help their employees through times of external crises too. In particular the sharing of stories has been shown by research to be an effective method to help prevent PTSD (Hayes & Campbell, 2000).

Psychologists have developed healing by using shared experiences in group therapy too. This originally found significant success with Israeli

trauma victims (Kfir, 1989). Storytelling works here as often victims close off and cannot communicate with their normal channels of help such as friends and family (Kfir, 1989). But talking to someone in the same situation creates a place to share and heal together. Accordingly the storytelling that occurs in such groups can be seen to be akin to group therapy whereby people with similar trauma are brought together to help heal each other (Kfir, 1989; Kestenberg, & Charlotte, 1998).

Further to this, research has revealed that people connect to different forms of expression depending on their psychological style and needs, so a variety of media should be used on the trial Website (Livingstone, 1988; Armstrong, 2000). The media used in therapy have been: narrative, poetry, art, music and photography.

1.4 How use of the Internet can Help Expatriates in a Political Crisis

Literature from psychology states that families in a political crisis can be helped via communication media (Stafford, Yu, & Armoo, 2002; Klingman, 2003). 0800 phone lines can be set up with advice for families. Television and radio can provide updates of events, and also helpful programmes for coping, one such example was seen in Elmo of Sesame Street who counselled his preschool viewers on how to cope with events of September 11th (Beatty, 2003). Computers and the Internet is that latest form of technology that is available to be used. Presently the Internet contains many useful links to Websites that provide advice to help parents guide children through a crisis, this includes different strategies depending on the age of the child.

Further research has stated that the Internet is an under exploited tool, particularly by companies (Dorobek, 2001, Wright, 2002; Klingman, 2003). It has been suggested that companies and volunteer networks could set up Intranets and Internet Websites specifically tailored to help with political instigated crises. Added to this, children themselves have been asking for such resources, especially they have requested computer games that would help teach them how to deal with crisis (Klingman, 2003). Further psychology and medical researcher has also stated that the Internet has proven to be a powerful tool for people in crisis, where they cannot emotionally reach out to family and friends, but they can seek information to help them on the Internet from people in the same situation via online

communities, which act like group therapy (Fogel, Albert, Schnabe, Ditkoff, & Neugut, 2003).

The development of online resources to help organisational employees is also supported by organisation behaviour academics, as they have begun to promote the idea of using online resources to support workers cope with family stress, as it has now been realised the serious impact this form of stress can cause in work effectiveness (Robbins, 1984; Robbins, 2003, Kreitner & Kinicki, 1992). This has seen the development of intranet and Internet resources on such matters. Thus the development of such resources to help expatriate families facing a political crisis is a natural extension of this philosophy too.

So, in conclusion we see that a crisis can be avoided for many expatriate employees and their families by providing them with the correct information as to how to cope with stressful situations. Further that by linking to other people in these situations, a Website can actively provide in hands on therapy, with the use of storytelling. This can directly help avoid long term PTSD. Further as we can see the Internet is now proving to be an effective means to deliver such help.



Figure 1. The Home Page for the Expatriates in a Political Crisis.

3. METHOD

The trial Website developed here is an example for companies to follow on how to build a sharing community on the Internet to help employees during a crisis. This research used a postmodern action research approach, drawing from the author's own family's experiences during the Libyan Revolution and using the development of a Website to aid the social transformation of expatriate families caught in

political crisis, from victims to empowered individuals. Subsequently stories were collected from other people that had survived war and terrorist attacks. Later it is intended that when this Website will be made accessible on the Internet, whereby, other expatriates will be able add their own stories, poems, photographs or artwork.

It was also decided that, the trial Website would also included information from psychology to help explain the effects of a crisis and why it affects us and how we can overcome it. Further to this the researcher sought out Internet resources to place on the Website for families. Klingman (2003) noted that both parents and children are asking for computer resources to help them through crisis, so two sections were devoted to helping children and parents to provide information on how to cope and to help them locate further resources on the Internet. In this way the Website would serve as a portal too. Also it was decided to set up an online 'Yahoo Group' to provide a community to share their concerns. This would be a place to share stories in a more interactive format and serve as a form of group therapy.

The motivation for this Website has been further supported by the author's research on expatriate online communities, who have contributed to the Website's stories and also offered to develop this trial site in the future. The expatriates interviewed believe such resources are desperately needed and that in most cases expatriates felt poorly supported by their company in such situations (Richardson, 2004). The use of a storytelling approach is also supported by this study as the author has observed how these communities deal with a crisis situation, such as the loss of a family member in unexpected and horrific situation (Richardson, 2004). The community responds by posting poetry, sharing stories of how they got through similar crisis, sharing songs, using images and PowerPoint presentations to the member through the crisis. As such storytelling was clearly demonstrated to be one of the ways fellow human beings help each other through a crisis.

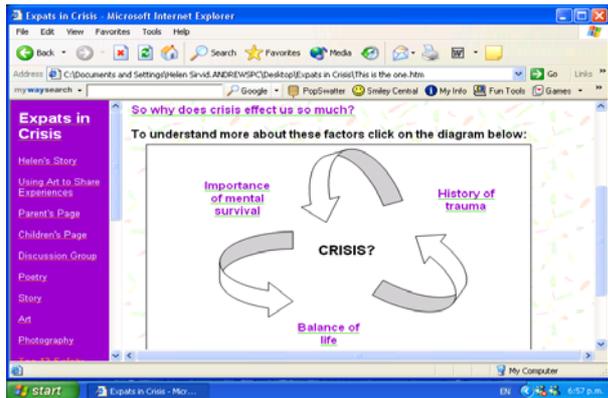


Figure 2. The interactive causes of Individual Crisis Model page, viewers can click on each section to find more information on each factor.

Future Project Extensions

This study is still in the early stages and will continue to be developed and tested by expatriate communities before being run live on the Internet. Further enhancement will be children's computer games developed in Flash, and the inclusion of music therapy. Interviews will be conducted with global corporations that extensively have expatriate employees in political unstable countries to discuss the feasibility of this approach and how corporations would view the usefulness of this product in the management of expatriates. Added to this, it is also suggested the resources could come on a CD rom or DvD format as it would help address access issues for countries with limited communications infrastructure.

4. CONCLUSION

Expatriate employees need to be supported more then ever on how to do deal with political crises that may arise in the countries where they are located. Organisations need to realise the potential of the Internet as a cheap and effective medium to achieve such support and that although providing employees with information is essential, an even more valuable resource is to link them with other people in similar situations.

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