Learning from Disasters: A Management Approach (Second Edition)

by Brian Toft and Simon Reynolds

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Reviewed by James D. Calder

Can we learn from disasters? The authors of *Learning from Disasters* reach beyond this question to organisational processes that aid or frustrate successful learning. First, they imply, public inquiries expose a commitment to learning and to corrective actions. Second, they assume that learning can strike at the maladies of organisational blinders, thus allowing change. And third, case studies provide grounds for the application of learning theory. I am convinced by the underlying assumption: disaster scenarios can be diagnosed for their essential contributing factors.

The chapter organisation is exceptionally well crafted for a course on disaster management. It opens with 'The Management of Risk' to demonstrate cost-effective and functionally useful risk strategies. Chapter 2 addresses 'Disasters as Systems Failures' to dispel the myth that organisations cannot learn from unfortunate circumstances. In Chapter 3 the methodology is clearly laid out as to the application of 'grounded theory' and use of data from 'face-to-face interviews, [and] letter... documentation...'. 'Generation of Hindsight', Chapter 4, draws upon public inquiries on disasters, mainly to demonstrate that each incident can be clarified when the complex factors are organised systematically. Chapters 5 and 6 focus on dimensions of organisational learning, the heart of the book's theoretical cast. Chapter 7 presents case studies of five major disaster events, each of which occurred in the UK, and Chapter 8 offers, albeit far too briefly, brief discussion and conclusions.

The glaring weakness is the chapter containing perspectives on the maladies of organisational decision-making. Chapter 6 discusses 'decision-making in conditions of ignorance', 'organisational change', 'complexity' and interferences to reasoned response. The principal weakness results from the fact that there are few references to the research on decision-making, and the supporting anecdotes do not add significant credibility. In the next edition, the authors should reflect upon the rich literature on maladies inherent in organisational decision-making, for example, the problem of 'satisficing', 'group-think' and organisational consensus, heuristic decision-making, and the mystical quality of numbers. Public investigations in the US often reveal that disasters do not always result from a lack of information or an unwillingness to act. Rather, they reflect diseases of perspective and focus that grow from infections that degrade good intentions.

The authors may have underestimated the book's real appeal to other international audiences since the research is limited to the UK experience. The authors should expand the case studies to include events in other countries, including perspectives on public investigations. Another chapter could reinforce the notion that learning potential is most likely affected by particular attitudinal, cultural, economic, and political factors. Additional benefit may come from a

chapter following the case studies in which the authors introduce the theory and conditions under which public or private managements demonstrate capacity for reaching beyond the suffocating constraints of bureaucracy, narrowness of perspective, and economic disincentives in planning a new order of disaster preparedness. Clearly, some organisational managers think and act in ways that demonstrate sensitivity to human and other costs of disasters. Can the authors hold up examples in which the actions of management appear to have reflected some applied learning? What more do we need to know about how organisations learn to bridge the gap between perceptions of social responsibility and beneficial actions to save lives and property.

Overall, this book is an excellent point of departure from the old ways of thinking about disaster preparedness. It is clearly written and engaging. In its current form, it is likely to have broad appeal in the UK, but it could be broadened further to appeal to academics and operating managers in other countries. Perhaps consideration should be given to translation into other languages.

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