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Communication in Crisis: Leadership Meaning-Making under Conditions of Uncertainty

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Abstract

The world is in crisis. As of March 2026, global energy markets are in turmoil following the Iran conflict, economies teeter on the edge of recession, and institutions across the world grapple with challenges that defy easy solutions. In such moments, communication ceases to be merely a technical function and becomes instead the primary mechanism through which leaders make sense of chaos and help others navigate it. This paper examines how leaders engage in meaning-making through communication when operating under conditions of profound uncertainty. Drawing on contemporary global crises—including the 2026 Iran conflict and its economic aftershocks, the COVID-19 pandemic's enduring lessons, and ongoing institutional disruptions—the study critically analyses the communication strategies leaders employ when the ground shifts beneath them. The paper argues that effective crisis communication is fundamentally an act of meaning-making: helping followers understand not just what is happening, but what it means, what they should feel, and what they should do. Through analysis of leadership communication across political, organisational, and community contexts, the study identifies key practices including the naming of uncertainty, the balancing of cognitive and emotional dimensions, the cultivation of trust through congruence, and the adaptation of communication to varying levels of uncertainty. The paper concludes with a framework for leadership meaning-making in crisis and recommendations for leaders at all levels who must communicate when certainty is nowhere to be found.

Keywords: Crisis communication, leadership, meaning-making, uncertainty, sensemaking, trust, global crisis, organisational communication

Introduction

As I write these words in March 2026, the world holds its breath. In the Persian Gulf, the Strait of Hormuz, through which 20% of the world's oil passes, remains partially closed, blocked by Iranian mines and drones. Tankers that once moved freely through these waters now sit idle or divert to longer routes. Insurance rates have skyrocketed. Oil prices briefly touched \$120 per barrel last week. The Federal



Reserve faces a dilemma it has not seen in decades: how to contain inflation without crushing an already-weakening job market. Americans are feeling the pinch at the pump, and consumer sentiment is falling. In Europe, affordable housing crises plague major cities. In South Africa, municipal communicators work around the clock to guide communities through devastating fires. Across the globe, leaders in every sector—government, business, education, healthcare are being tested as they have not been tested in years.

This is the context in which this paper is written. It is not an abstract exercise. It is an attempt to understand something urgently important: how leaders communicate when the ground beneath them is shifting, when the old rules no longer apply, when the future is genuinely unknown.

The Central Argument

The central argument of this paper is straightforward but, I believe, profound: in conditions of crisis and uncertainty, communication is not merely about transmitting information. It is about making meaning.

When the world becomes incomprehensible, people do not just need facts, though facts matter. They need help understanding what those facts mean. They need to know how to feel, whether to be afraid, hopeful, determined, or patient. They need to know what to do, how to act when the usual scripts no longer apply. Leaders who understand this, who see communication as meaning-making rather than message-sending, are the ones who guide their organisations and communities through crisis. Those who do not who treat communication as a box to be checked, a statement to be issued, a press conference to be endured, lose the trust of those they lead and compound the confusion that crisis always brings.

Scope and Approach

This paper examines leadership meaning-making through communication across multiple levels and contexts. It draws on contemporary examples from the 2026 global crises, including the Iran conflict and its economic impacts, as well as lessons from recent history including the COVID-19 pandemic. It engages with scholarly literature on crisis communication, leadership, and sensemaking. And it reflects on the practical challenges leaders face when they must speak without knowing what comes next.

The paper is organised in six parts. Following this introduction, Section 2 reviews relevant theoretical frameworks. Section 3 outlines the critical analytical methodology. Section 4 presents the analysis organised around key dimensions of leadership meaning-making. Section 5 discusses implications for practice. Section 6 concludes with recommendations and reflections.

Throughout, I have tried to write in a way that honors the human reality of crisis—the fear people feel, the confusion they experience, the hope they cling to. Leadership communication is not an academic abstraction. It is a lifeline.

Literature Review

Crisis, Uncertainty, and the Need for Meaning

Crises, by their nature, disrupt meaning. They shatter the assumptions people rely on to navigate their world—that tomorrow will look something like today, that institutions can be trusted, that risks are manageable. As Weick et al. (2005) observe in their foundational work on sensemaking, crisis creates a gap between what people expected and what they experience. That gap must be bridged, and sensemaking is the bridge.

Uncertainty is not a single phenomenon but varies in both degree and kind. Bansal and colleagues (2024), in their study of leadership communication during COVID-19, distinguish between "high uncertain" and "low uncertain" crises. In high-uncertainty crises a pandemic, a war, a financial collapse, leaders



themselves do not know what will happen. They cannot offer certainty because they do not possess it. In low-uncertainty crises a predictable natural disaster, a contained organisational failure, leaders may have clearer knowledge of what comes next, even if the situation is difficult.

This distinction matters because it shapes what communication can and should do. In low-uncertainty crises, leaders can inform: here is what is happening, here is what will happen, here is what you should do. In high-uncertainty crises, leaders cannot inform in the same way. They must instead help followers tolerate not knowing, maintain trust in the absence of guarantees, and stay engaged with a process whose outcome remains unclear.

Clarity Scarcity in Crisis

Ejeh's (2026) concept of clarity scarcity, developed in *When Clarity is Scarce*, provides a valuable lens for understanding crisis communication. Clarity, in this framework, is not an automatic byproduct of information transmission but an achievement, something that must be actively produced through specific practices, relationships, and conditions.

In crisis, clarity becomes particularly scarce for several reasons. First, the information environment itself degrades: rumors spread, official sources may be silent or contradictory, and the sheer volume of communication can overwhelm cognitive capacity. Second, trust in sources, always necessary for clarity may be damaged by the very fact of crisis: if institutions failed to prevent the crisis, why trust them to guide us through it? Third, the emotional weight of crisis interferes with cognitive processing: fear, grief, and anger all make it harder to achieve the calm understanding that clarity requires.

Leaders who understand clarity scarcity recognise that their task is not simply to provide information but to create the conditions under which clarity might emerge. This may mean slowing down when everyone wants speed, repeating messages when everyone wants novelty, and acknowledging limits when everyone wants certainty.

Trust as the Foundation

Trust is the bedrock on which all crisis communication rests. Without it, the most carefully crafted messages will fail. With it, even imperfect communication can sustain relationships through difficulty.

Research on trusted leadership (Galford & Drapeau, 2002; Correia, 2026) identifies several dimensions of trust that matter in crisis. Competence trust is the belief that leaders know what they are doing that they have the expertise and judgment to navigate the situation. Communications trust is the belief that leaders are telling the truth that they are honest, transparent, and not hiding important information. Contractual trust is the belief that leaders will keep their commitments, that promises made will be promises kept.

In crisis, all three forms of trust are tested. Competence is questioned when plans fail. Communications trust is strained when leaders must acknowledge uncertainty or bad news. Contractual trust is threatened when circumstances force leaders to break promises they genuinely intended to keep.

Crucially, trust is built through congruence the alignment between what leaders say and what they do, between their words in public and their behavior in private. When leaders model the calm they ask others to maintain, when they make sacrifices they ask others to accept, when they acknowledge their own struggles while supporting others through theirs, congruence builds trust. When leaders say one thing and do another, trust evaporates.

Compassion and Persuasion in Crisis Communication

An emerging body of research emphasises the role of compassion and persuasion in crisis communication. Bansal et al. (2024), drawing on interviews with 21 C-suite leaders during COVID-19,



found that effective crisis communication balanced operational concerns (getting things done) with relational concerns (supporting people). Leaders who focused only on operations, treating employees as instruments to achieve goals, generated resentment and withdrawal. Leaders who focused only on relationships, offering emotional support without practical guidance, generated warmth without direction.

The most effective leaders integrated both, communicating in ways that acknowledged the human reality of crisis while maintaining focus on collective purpose. They expressed genuine care for the people they led, checking on their wellbeing, accommodating their needs, recognising their struggles. But they also maintained direction, helping people understand what was expected and why it mattered. This integration of compassion and persuasion, heart and spine, characterised the most trusted leadership.

The Global Context: Interconnected Crises

The crises of 2026 are not isolated events. They are interconnected in ways that compound uncertainty and complicate communication. The Iran conflict disrupts energy markets, which affects inflation, which affects central bank policy, which affects employment, which affects housing, which affects social stability. A leader communicating about any one of these issues must contend with all of them, because the people they lead experience the whole web of crises, not isolated strands.

This interconnectedness means that crisis communication cannot be siloed. A business leader addressing employees cannot ignore geopolitics, because geopolitics affects the business. A political leader addressing citizens cannot ignore global markets, because markets affect livelihoods. Leaders must demonstrate what might be called contextual intelligence—the ability to situate local challenges within global dynamics and help others understand the connections.

Method

This study employs critical analytical methodology, a qualitative approach suited to examining complex social phenomena that require interpretive understanding. Critical analysis, as understood in communication research, involves systematic examination of texts, practices, and structures with attention to context, power, and meaning (Fairclough, 2013).

The methodological approach combines three elements:

Documentary analysis examines contemporary sources including news reports, leadership communications, policy documents, and existing research. This provides empirical grounding for the analysis while acknowledging that documentary evidence itself participates in the dynamics under examination. Sources include coverage of the 2026 Iran conflict, reports on global economic impacts, and documentation of crisis communication practices across sectors.

Synthesis of existing research integrates findings from multiple studies across communication studies, leadership research, organizational behaviour, and related fields. The research by Bansal et al. (2024) on leadership knowledge systems during COVID-19 provides particularly valuable theoretical grounding.

Critical interpretation applies theoretical frameworks to make sense of observed phenomena, moving beyond description to explanation and normative evaluation. This interpretive dimension acknowledges the researcher's position within the communication dynamics analysed while striving for rigorous, transparent reasoning.

The analysis is organised thematically, with each section examining a specific dimension of leadership meaning-making in crisis. Evidence is drawn from documented cases and established research findings, with attention to ensuring that claims are supportable and interpretations reasonable.



Analysis: Dimensions of Leadership Meaning-Making in Crisis

Naming Uncertainty: The First Act of Leadership

When crisis strikes, the first challenge leaders face is what to say about the unknown. The temptation is strong to project certainty that does not exist to assure people that everything is under control, that the future is clear, that plans are solid. This temptation is understandable. Leaders want to reassure. They want to project confidence. They do not want to admit that they, too, are navigating fog.

But false certainty is a trap. When leaders claim to know what they cannot know, they set themselves up for a crisis of credibility when events prove them wrong. The Federal Reserve's experience during the 1970s oil crisis offers a cautionary tale. Policymakers resisted raising interest rates, arguing that inflationary pressures were outside their control a stance that allowed inflation to become entrenched. The Fed learned from that mistake. Today's leaders, confronting the 2026 oil crisis, understand that acknowledging uncertainty is not weakness but wisdom.

Correia (2026) argues that "naming uncertainty is an act of leadership". When leaders openly acknowledge that they do not have all the answers, they accomplish several things simultaneously. They model honesty, showing that they can be trusted to tell the truth even when it is uncomfortable. They invite collective intelligence, signaling that input from others is welcome and needed. They create psychological safety, freeing followers from the impossible expectation that they should have everything figured out.

Consider how leaders might communicate about the current oil crisis. They cannot say with certainty how high prices will go, how long the Strait of Hormuz will remain blocked, or how central banks will respond. But they can name the uncertainty honestly: "We are watching the situation closely. We do not know how this will unfold. Here is what we are doing to prepare for different scenarios. Here is how we will keep you informed. Here is what we ask of you in the meantime."

This kind of communication does not eliminate anxiety nothing can do that. But it channels anxiety into productive engagement rather than leaving it to fester in the dark.

Balancing Cognitive and Emotional Loads

Crises impose two kinds of burdens on people: cognitive and emotional. The cognitive burden is the challenge of understanding what is happening, processing complex information, and making decisions under pressure. The emotional burden is the challenge of managing fear, grief, anger, and uncertainty the feelings that crisis inevitably generates.

Leaders must attend to both. Bansal et al. (2024) found that effective crisis communication balanced operational information (addressing cognitive needs) with relational support (addressing emotional needs). Leaders who provided only operational information facts, figures, instructions, left people emotionally adrift. Leaders who provided only emotional support sympathy, encouragement, reassurance left people cognitively confused about what to do.

The integration of both is the art of crisis communication. When a South African municipal communicator addressed communities during devastating fires, the team did not just provide information about road closures and evacuation procedures. They also communicated with empathy, acknowledging the fear residents were feeling and providing reassurance that the municipality was doing everything possible. The team understood that people needed both: practical guidance for their bodies and emotional support for their hearts.

In the current global crisis, leaders face the same challenge. Workers worried about their jobs need information about company stability and contingency plans. But they also need acknowledgment of their



anxiety and support for their wellbeing. Citizens worried about inflation need information about government responses and practical tips for managing household budgets. But they also need leaders who demonstrate that they understand the human cost of rising prices.

Tailoring Communication to Perceived Uncertainty

Not all crises are alike, and not all uncertainty is the same. Bansal et al. (2024) distinguish between high-uncertainty and low-uncertain crises, arguing that communication must be tailored to the level of uncertainty followers perceive.

In low-uncertainty crises, leaders can communicate with relative confidence. The path forward, while difficult, is knowable. In such contexts, communication can be directive: here is what is happening, here is what will happen next, here is what you should do. The 2026 fires in South Africa, while devastating, followed patterns that emergency responders understood. Communication could be precise and prescriptive because the situation, though serious, was comprehensible.

In high-uncertainty crises, the situation is different. Leaders themselves do not know what comes next. The COVID-19 pandemic in its early days exemplified this: no one knew how the virus spread, how deadly it was, or when vaccines might arrive. In such contexts, directive communication is impossible and would be dishonest. Leaders must instead communicate process: here is how we are gathering information, here is who is involved in decisions, here is when we will update you next, here is how you can contribute.

The current global situation contains elements of both low and high uncertainty. Some dimensions—the mechanics of oil markets, the history of central bank responses—are relatively well understood. Others, how the Iran conflict will escalate, how global supply chains will adapt, how consumers will behave, are genuinely unknown. Effective leaders must calibrate their communication accordingly, being clear about what is known and honest about what is not.

The Role of Congruence in Building Trust

Trust, as noted earlier, is the foundation of crisis communication. And congruence alignment between words and actions is the foundation of trust.

Correia (2026) emphasises that "congruence is the bridge between values and action". When leaders say they care about employee wellbeing but impose unreasonable demands, congruence fails. When leaders urge sacrifice but exempt themselves from it, congruence fails. When leaders promise transparency but hide difficult information, congruence fails. Each failure erodes trust a little more, and trust eroded in crisis is difficult to rebuild.

Conversely, congruence builds trust even in difficult circumstances. The leader who acknowledges uncertainty honestly, then follows through on commitments to communicate regularly, demonstrates congruence. The leader who asks others to sacrifice, then sacrifices alongside them, demonstrates congruence. The leader who admits mistakes, then works to correct them, demonstrates congruence.

In the context of the 2026 crises, congruence matters enormously. Political leaders asking citizens to bear the burden of inflation must demonstrate that they, too, are feeling the pinch—not insulated from economic realities. Business leaders asking employees to accept uncertainty about jobs must demonstrate that they, too, are forgoing certainty, not protecting themselves while asking others to risk. Organisational leaders asking teams to work harder during crisis must demonstrate that they, too, are working harder, not leaving early while others stay late.

Compassion as Operational, Not Rhetorical



A recurring theme in the literature and in practice is the centrality of compassion in crisis communication. But compassion must be more than rhetoric more than statements of sympathy issued for public consumption.

Correia (2026) describes compassion as "operational, not rhetorical". This means that compassion shows up in actions, not just words. It means checking on team members individually, not just sending a mass email. It means adjusting expectations when people are struggling, not just encouraging them to persevere. It means allocating resources to support wellbeing, not just expressing concern about it.

The Turks and Caicos Islands Government's crisis communication training emphasized that communication must be "proactive" rather than merely "reactive", a tool for leadership rather than a response to events. This proactive stance includes anticipating the needs people will have and addressing them before they are asked. Compassionate leaders think ahead about what their people will need information, support, flexibility and provide it without waiting to be asked.

During COVID-19, the most trusted leaders were those who demonstrated this kind of proactive compassion. They reached out to employees working from home, checking on their wellbeing. They provided resources for mental health support. They accommodated childcare responsibilities and family needs. They communicated frequently, not because they had new information every day but because they understood that silence breeds anxiety.

In the current crisis, the same principles apply. Leaders who wait for people to ask for help will help too late. Leaders who anticipate needs and address them proactively will build the trust that crisis requires.

Communication Infrastructure: Preparing for the Unknown

One of the lessons from recent crises is that organisations cannot build effective crisis communication from scratch when disaster strikes. The infrastructure must be in place beforehand.

Kouga Local Municipality's success in communicating during the January 2026 fires was not accidental. The municipality had established a Disaster Joint Operations Centre that integrated communication professionals into emergency response structures from the beginning. When the fires started, communicators were already at the table, already connected to decision-makers, already prepared to translate operational information into public guidance.

Similarly, the Turks and Caicos Islands Government invested in crisis communication training for senior officials before crises occurred. Participants engaged in scenario-based exercises, simulated media interviews, and rapid-response drills. They built muscle memory for communication under pressure so that when real crises came, they would not be learning on the job.

This kind of preparation matters because crisis communication is difficult. Under pressure, cognitive capacity narrows. Emotional intensity distorts judgment. Time compresses. Leaders who have not practiced crisis communication will make predictable mistakes, withholding information too long, speaking before they know what to say, sending mixed messages, failing to coordinate across channels.

The organisations that navigate crisis best are those that have built communication infrastructure beforehand: clear protocols, trained personnel, established relationships, practiced routines. This infrastructure does not guarantee success, but it makes success possible.

Discussion: Toward a Framework for Leadership Meaning-Making in Crisis

Synthesising the Dimensions

The analysis above identifies several interconnected dimensions of leadership meaning-making in crisis. These can be synthesized into a framework that may guide both practice and further research.



Foundation: Trust. All crisis communication rests on trust. Without it, messages fail. With it, even imperfect communication can sustain relationships. Trust is built through congruence, demonstrated over time, and tested most severely in crisis.

First Act: Naming Uncertainty. Leaders must acknowledge what they do not know. False certainty is a trap. Honest acknowledgment of limits, combined with commitment to process, creates the conditions for collective sensemaking.

Dual Focus: Cognitive and Emotional. Effective communication addresses both what people need to understand (cognitive) and what they need to feel (emotional). Neither alone is sufficient.

Calibration: Tailoring to Uncertainty. Communication must be calibrated to the level of uncertainty followers perceive. High uncertainty requires process-focused communication; lower uncertainty allows more directive communication.

Heart: Compassion in Action. Compassion must be operational, not rhetorical. It shows up in actions that support people through difficulty, not just in words that express sympathy.

Infrastructure: Preparation. Organisations that communicate best in crisis have built infrastructure beforehand, protocols, training, relationships, routines.

The Global Moment: Implications for Leaders

The world in March 2026 presents leaders with extraordinary challenges. The Iran conflict has disrupted global energy markets in ways not seen in decades. Economic uncertainty is widespread, with inflation and employment moving in opposite directions. Housing crises plague cities across Europe. Trust in institutions remains fragile.

For leaders at every level, this moment demands the kind of communication this paper has described. Not message-sending, but meaning-making. Not information dumps, but sensemaking. Not spin, but substance.

Political leaders must help citizens understand why energy prices are rising and what can and cannot be done about it. They must acknowledge the pain people feel while maintaining hope that solutions are possible. They must coordinate across borders because the crisis knows no borders.

Business leaders must help employees navigate uncertainty about jobs, markets, and the future. They must balance operational demands with human needs. They must communicate with transparency even when the news is bad.

Community leaders must hold people together when forces pull them apart. They must create spaces for dialogue and support. They must model the calm and compassion they ask others to show.

The Limits of Communication

It is important, in closing this discussion, to acknowledge what communication cannot do. Communication cannot solve crises by itself. It cannot stop Iranian drones, or lower oil prices, or create jobs, or build houses. It cannot eliminate fear or grief or uncertainty.

What communication can do, what leadership meaning-making can do, is help people face those realities together rather than alone. It can create shared understanding even when agreement is impossible. It can sustain relationships through difficulty. It can keep hope alive when hope is hard to find.

These are not small things. They are, in fact, the things that make collective action possible. Without shared meaning, there is no "we" to face the crisis. Communication creates that "we."



Conclusion and Recommendations

This paper has examined how leaders engage in meaning-making through communication when operating under conditions of crisis and uncertainty. Drawing on contemporary global crises and scholarly research, it has argued that crisis communication is fundamentally an act of meaning-making, helping followers understand not just what is happening, but what it means, what they should feel, and what they should do.

The analysis has identified key dimensions of this meaning-making work: naming uncertainty honestly, balancing cognitive and emotional support, tailoring communication to perceived uncertainty, building trust through congruence, demonstrating compassion operationally, and preparing communication infrastructure beforehand.

The world of March 2026 provides a stark backdrop for this analysis. The Iran conflict, economic instability, and interconnected global challenges test leaders as they have not been tested in years. The quality of their communication, their ability to make meaning rather than just send messages will shape how their organizations and communities navigate this difficult moment.

In line with the discourse, the following recommendations are hereby put forward:

For leaders at all levels

1. Name uncertainty honestly. Do not pretend to know what you cannot know. Acknowledge limits while committing to process. People can tolerate not knowing if they trust that you are navigating honestly.
2. Address both heads and hearts. Provide the information people need to understand what is happening. Also acknowledge what they are feeling and offer support for emotional challenges.
3. Calibrate to context. In high-uncertainty situations, communicate process. In lower-uncertainty situations, communicate direction. Match your communication to what followers need.
4. Live your message. Congruence between words and actions is the foundation of trust. Model what you ask of others. Sacrifice as you ask others to sacrifice. Be in the struggle with them.
5. Make compassion operational. Do not just express sympathy. Act on it. Check on people individually. Adjust expectations when needed. Provide resources for support.
6. Build infrastructure before crisis strikes. Establish protocols, train teams, build relationships, practice routines. You cannot build communication capacity in the middle of crisis.
7. Communicate frequently. Silence breeds anxiety. Even when you have nothing new to say, say that and remind people when you will communicate next.
8. Coordinate across boundaries. Crises cross borders. Communication must too. Connect with other leaders, share information, align messages.

For Organizations:

1. Integrate communication into crisis structures. Communicators should be at the table, not brought in after decisions are made. The Kouga model of embedding communicators in the Joint Operations Centre is a best practice.
2. Invest in training and preparation. Crisis communication is a skill that must be practiced. Scenario-based training builds muscle memory for when it matters.
3. Develop protocols that enable flexibility. Too much structure stifles adaptation; too little invites chaos. Find the balance.
4. Support leader wellbeing. Leaders cannot support others if they are not supported themselves. Attend to the human needs of those who carry communication burdens.

For Educators and Researchers:

1. Study what works. Document cases of effective crisis communication. Extract lessons that can be applied elsewhere.



2. Teach crisis communication as meaning-making. Move beyond technical skills to address the deeper challenges of sensemaking under uncertainty.
3. Develop context-sensitive frameworks. What works in one cultural context may not work in another. Research must attend to difference.

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