

# READINESS: THE KEYSTONE OF CRISIS MANAGEMENT ARCHITECTURE

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Sticky crises have challenged industry leaders to evaluate existing approaches to crisis management. In a global quest led by the Crisis Communication Think Tank, **READINESS** has been identified as the keystone for a new architecture for managing issues, risks, conflicts, and crises. The new **READINESS** framework is supported by three pillars: multi-level efficacy, mindset, and dynamic process. It provides an enhanced map for corporate communication leaders to navigate through uncharted waters of emerging and mutating threats in order to safeguard business and security, and improving policy and governance.

## READINESS: THE KEYSTONE LOST AND FOUND

Let's face it – we wouldn't be ready to even talk about **READINESS** if practitioners and scholars are not ready to think and act collaboratively. Before the new concept **READINESS** was widely recognized by scholars and practitioners alike, there is the notion of “sticky crisis” that scholars and practitioners jointly identified as a challenge. Sticky crises are manifested in complex, challenging, and recurring issues which bleed across sectors, industries, and geographical borders (Jin et al., 2024). Think of toxic polarization, geopolitical conflicts, social unrests, AI-driven disinformation campaigns, moral outages triggered by

scandals (Coombs & Tachkova, 2023) which is rooted in greed and injustice and occurs when a crisis and a scandal fuse, and public trust erosion across institutions (van der Meer et al., 2024). The list is infinite. Although these might not always materialize into a real crisis for all companies, business leaders must be ready to see around the corner and have an agile system to anticipate and mitigate risks. For example, if you're in the beer industry in 2023, one of the questions that kept you awake at night likely was (and probably still is): How to avoid the Bud Light influencer campaign backlash? So sticky indeed.

As a leading crisis executive reflected at a Crisis Communication Think Tank (CCTT) webinar during the pandemic, combating sticky crises is like fighting quicksand – you’re stuck, and you instinctively fight, and fight really hard; but it won’t work and you’re sinking even deeper. How to fight sticky crises? A typical playbook won’t work. The existing architecture of crisis management might not be sufficient to address these complex and often spilling-over crisis threats (Wang & Laufer, 2024). If we are to devise something new, do we even have a blueprint?

Then at the end of the CCTT 2023 gathering, another communication executive threw in an insight that led to the “aha” moment – in military settings, you always need to be ready for combat. Likewise, in the crisis management world, leaders and their teams need to be always ready to combat crises and protect business, stakeholders, public health and safety, as well as security at individual, team, organization, and national levels. That’s how we found READINESS – the missing keystone for the crisis management architecture.

## “THE BEST OF BOTH WORLDS”: THE CRISIS COMMUNICATION THINK TANK (CCTT)

The Crisis Communication Think Tank (CCTT) was founded in 2018 at the University of Georgia to create a thought leadership entity led by top communication executives and leading crisis communication scholars worldwide. The CCTT’s mission is to advance crisis management research, practice, and training by identifying critical challenges together and crafting new directions for possible solutions (Jin et al., 2024).

We, as a US-Netherlands CCTT research team, have started our journey together towards the development of a new framework to address sticky crisis challenges and get organizations ready for an increasingly complex, ever-changing, and conflicting media environment and sociopolitical landscape. In the special issue Crisis Management Keystone in the Journal of Contingencies and Crisis Management, our first concept piece on READINESS and the new framework was published, titled

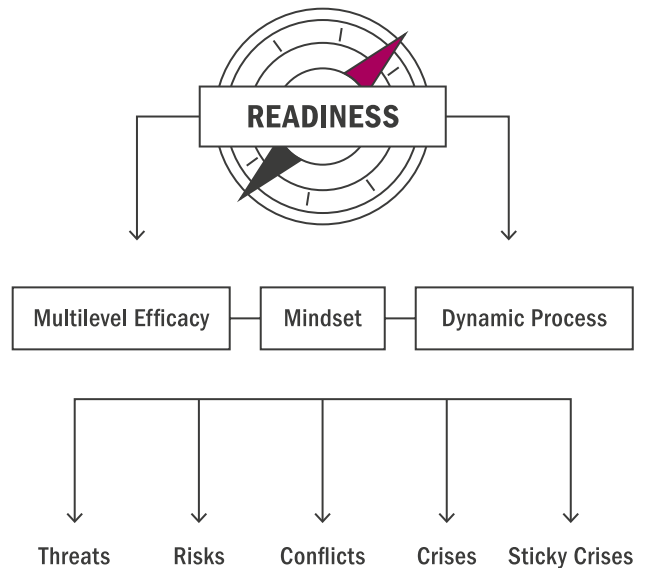
**READINESS:** A keystone concept beyond organizational crisis preparedness and resilience (Jin et al., 2024).

The READINESS model is already being used for crafting training to help prepare crisis managers for the challenging crises they’re likely to face. We’re also co-editing a new special issue, titled *Navigating uncharted waters: The forefront of crisis READINESS* in collaboration with the Journal of Communication Management.

## READINESS ESSENTIALS: KEY PILLARS AND PROCESS-OUTCOME DUALITY

We define READINESS as “a multidimensional construct with multilevel efficacy, mental adaptability, and emotional leadership-focused mindset, with a dynamic process-driven agility at its core” (Jin et al., 2024). As a multidimensional construct, READINESS as an umbrella framework is supported by three pillars: multilevel efficacy, mindset, and dynamic process.

### The READINESS model



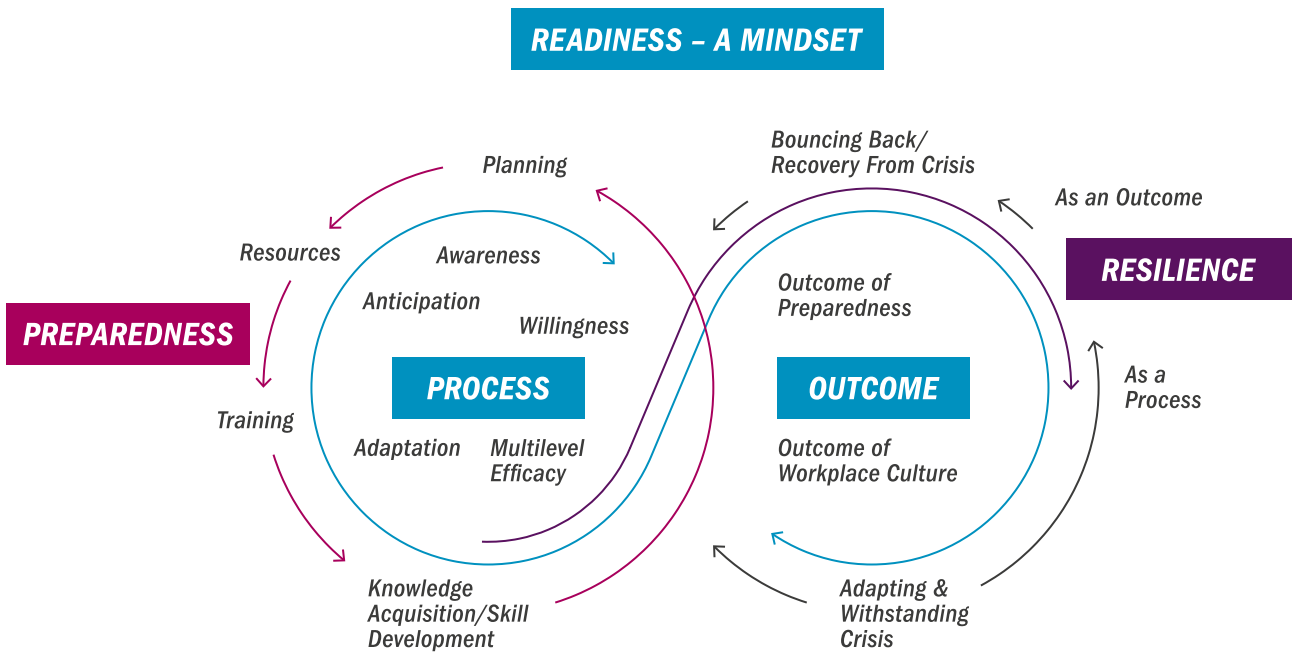
Source: Jin et al., 2024

We also gained initial empirical insights from scholars and practitioners via the CCTT global network (Jin et al., 2025). These expert insights affirmed the relevance and importance of READINESS as a concept that goes beyond preparedness and resilience. Light was shed on:

- The dual nature of crisis READINESS as both a process and an outcome;

- Resilience as both a process and an outcome; and
- A key distinction between READINESS and preparedness: While READINESS is conceived of as a mindset, preparedness is conceived of as physical tools, training, and planning.

## READINESS as a process and outcome



Source: Jin et al, 2025

## THE CENTRAL ROLE OF MINDSET

“This is fun!” – a frequent comment made by crisis communication practitioners when describing why they choose crisis management as the career focus. Although no crisis is ever fun in and of itself, and the process of managing a crisis is stressful and often painful, there are certain unique traits or features that set crisis leaders apart from general business and communication management leaders.

As the key differentiator from preparedness, the right mindset is essential to READINESS. The READINESS mindset represents a holistic integration of:

- High emotional intelligence;
- The right attitude; and
- Optimal mentality and adaptability.

What we discover is that the willingness – at individual, team and organizational levels – to engage in crisis communication as an ongoing process, with courage, creativity and commitment, is essential. The capability and authenticity in building trusting relationships with top leadership, mid-management, and employees, as well as gaining influence at the final decision-making table are critical.

One of the understudied and underemphasized areas of crisis leadership is the right attitude. Humility, for instance, is both a trait, a character, and gesture designed by stakeholders as it provides “a sensegiving function that decreases stakeholders’ negative emotions and fosters their trust in leadership” (Graffeo & Jin, 2024). No wonder that humility (i.e., a peaceful heart that lives in harmony with others), together with compassion and frugality, are considered the “Three Treasures” of Taoism philosophy.

Mental adaptability is another key ingredient, which has two facets:

- Cognitive adaptability (the ability and willingness of allocating one’s attention to feedback from the context of a complex situation); and
- Affective adaptability (the ability and willingness of withholding one’s affective responses during or after an emotionally-charged incident with high situational awareness of the nuanced crisis communication settings).

Crisis leaders with optimal mental adaptability are more likely to:

- “Believe they can effectively accomplish the crisis tasks required of them (self-efficacy),
- trust the organization’s approach for managing the crisis,
- be confident in the ability of the organization and its teams to manage the crisis,
- and be optimistic for the overall outcome” (Jin et al., 2025).

Optimal mentality and adaptability are critical in managing constantly evolving or mutating crises and sticky crisis situations, requiring both cognitive and affective adaptability.

## MULTILEVEL EFFICACY AND CROSS-LEARNING

Our READINESS framework integrates self-efficacy and collective efficacy, as individual practitioners and in the crisis management team setting when managing issues, risks, conflicts, and crises as an ongoing managerial process. As a legal expert, our CCTT executive training team emphasizes that it’s time to change “cross-training” (e.g., the communications team getting trained by legal counsels) to “cross-learning” (e.g., the legal team hoping to learn from the communications team) model, especially during the prevention and preparation phases of crisis management.

Multilevel efficacy is both horizontal (within a team and at the same management level) and vertical (across different levels of management, from top management, middle management, operational leads, and frontline employees). In an organizational crisis setting, multilevel efficacy involves the individual, team, and organizational levels. As noted by a crisis communication scholar at our 2024 member gathering, in a large-scale disaster setting, inter-organizational efficacy will be essential when it comes to coordinating with multiple agencies in emergency response and disaster management. The building of READINESS efficacy starts from individual efficacy, team efficacy, to multidisciplinary cross-team learning and training to deal with internal and external setbacks encountered when managing a crisis.

It’s critical to keep in mind that the individual level of READINESS applies to all members within an organization, not just the crisis team. Frontline employees, operation management, middle managers, division heads, and board members need to be in good alignment to sustain consistency, quality, and adaptability as a complex crisis situation evolves. Think of any large-scale nature of disaster emergency evacuation or a chaotic, rumor-laden scandal triggered by CEO behavior. All members of an organization may be required to confront a threat and play their roles via mediated (both traditional and social) and offline interpersonal communications.

The crisis team must possess a collective sense of READINESS, demonstrating both humility and belief in action that:

- The team has the ability and shared willingness to handle a crisis with desired positive outcomes;
- The team has confidence in their own and the larger organization's (including other departments') skills in taking the optimal actions;
- The organizational culture has a built-in capacity in managing uncertainties based on systematic stress-tests and improvements; and
- The dominant coalition and top leadership have and are willing to allocate resources and other support to managing the situational demands from a crisis.

## READY TOGETHER ACROSS BOARD ROOM, WAR ROOM AND COURT ROOM

The fascinating process-outcome duality of READINESS, draws parallels to the wave-particle duality of photons. We can all agree that one cannot be too ready. With regard to whether and how to be ready all the time, just as the observation of photons is complex, the assessment of READINESS is yet to be further discovered and refined.

A process view is essential in crisis management, capturing the dynamic aspect of READINESS. Crises are disruptions for organizations and their people, as well as relationships from within and without, leading to uncertainties and changes. Sticky crisis challenges amplify the impact through the process. Dynamic capabilities, agile infrastructure, and mindset-aligned organizational culture are critical for communication leaders to help their organizations to better navigate uncertainty and disruption, across:

- The board room (top leadership support and buy-in);
- War room (multidisciplinary crisis team composed of area experts, e.g., communications, legal, finance who understand and respect each other and have a stress-tested process in place to be crisis ready all the time); and

- The courtrooms of the law and public opinions (willingness to engage in conflict resolution and negotiation process via issue position articulation, listening, and strategic conflict positioning that helps identify optimal strategy making and execution).

As Sun-Tzu wrote in *The Art of War*, "In the midst of chaos, there is also opportunity". Among the five essentials for victory, Sun-Tzu pointed out the need to know "when to fight and when not to fight" and to ensure the army is "animated by the same spirit throughout all its ranks". But how can we animate the spirit, or, in the READINESS framework, align the mindset across levels and roles?

Michel de Montaigne pointed out the surest sign of wisdom is constant cheerfulness – a wisdom so important in combating sticky crises, especially prolonged ones such as the pandemic. How can we stay alert yet optimistic (while avoiding the trap of complacency or over confidence) along the process so that opportunities can be identified and captured in time, taking both the pillars of efficacy and mindset individually and collectively?

Drawing inspiration from the sports-comedy-drama

television series *Ted Lasso*, the "believe" speech given by Coach Lasso in the locker room, when the team was about to give up and lose the game, resonates loud and clear: "I think it's the lack of hope that comes and gets you. ... See, I

believe in hope. I believe in belief."

*The fascinating process-outcome duality of READINESS draws parallels to the wave-particle duality of photons.*

## LEAPING INTO READINESS: LEADERSHIP, EVALUATION, ALIGNMENT, PRECISION

The new READINESS framework offers a novel means for approaching crisis management. It also lays the foundation for developing a measurement for assessing how ready organizations are to manage risks and crises.

To unpack the READINESS-focused new crisis leadership, the collective efforts among CCTT members are orchestrated in the 2025 CCTT theme of LEAP: Leadership, Evaluation, Alignment, Precision. These four dimensions, constructed

around the efficacy-mindset-process READINESS pillars, manifest organizational READINESS in managing threats, risks, conflicts, and crises, including sticky crises.

For corporate communication executives, we recom-

mend building a READINESS system as the chief organizational protection operation with the core LEAP units in place throughout the prevention, preparedness, response, and revisit crisis management phases.

## LEAP: FOUR MANIFESTATIONS OF ORGANIZATIONAL READINESS



**Leadership** development and training emphasizing multilevel efficacy, mindset optimization via cross-learning.



**Evaluating** organizational wellbeing and crisis READINESS according to organizational, industrial, and cultural environments and proactive issue anticipation and readiness plan development.



**Aligning** leadership vision across top-middle-group levels and fostering crisis-ready relationships with primary stakeholders that is in line with organizational purpose and vision.



**Precision-focused** conflict positioning based on proactive and strategic corporate governance and crisis management systems, enhanced with emerging technology such as AI.

## OUTLOOK

We're thankful for the opportunity to share our READINESS work with communication executives and business leaders. One of the most rewarding comments we received is that it's powerful and opens new ways of thinking. At the CCTT, we think and do together. It's our collective goal to get READY with our peers and collaborators around the world.

Based on the strong launch of the READINESS research and training programs, we look forward to collaborating further to refine our new conceptual lens and craft robust metrics for effective crisis management and measurement of READINESS on an ongoing basis. We will develop an instrument to assess READINESS, test the instrument, evaluate the relationships between the key variables in the model,

and apply the instrument to create a new READINESS metric for organizations. Our goal is to create a tangible, practical tool that organizations and corporate communication leaders can use, enabling them to quantitatively assess and enhance their crisis management capabilities.

Kurt Lewin once said, "There is nothing more practical than a good theory." READINESS, as a new theoretical framework, has demonstrated its practical values to practitioners. We will continue to refine this crisis management keystone, equipping organizations with a forward-thinking approach to corporate communication and scientifically tested tools for optimal decision making and business operations in the face of sticky crisis challenges.

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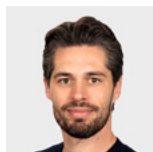
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## MORE INFORMATION

For a more in-depth discussion of the READINESS concept, see the peer-reviewed articles by Jin et al., 2024 and 2025 (listed above) or visit the Crisis Communication Think Tank’s website at <https://grady.uga.edu/crisis-communication-think-tank/>.

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