

Chapter 1

A "Polycrisis" Isn't Just Many Crises - It's How They Interact and Amplify Each Other

The nature of crises has fundamentally shifted. For decades, organisations and governments approached crises as discrete, singular events: a product recall, a data breach, a natural disaster, an economic downturn.

Each challenge demanded a specific, contained response, often managed in isolation by dedicated teams.

That traditional view no longer aligns with the dynamic realities you face today. We are now firmly in the age of polycrisis, a phenomenon that demands an entirely new approach to communication and planning.

This chapter lays the foundation for that new approach.

We will define the concept of polycrisis, illustrate why traditional linear planning is now dangerously obsolete, and explore the mindset shift required to move from managing isolated events to handling interconnected systems.

By having a clear view of the amplified challenges communication managers face and examining the high cost of unpreparedness through real-world examples, you will see the urgent need for the adaptive frameworks this workbook will help you build.

1.1 Defining Polycrisis: When Crises Amplify Each Other

What exactly is a "polycrisis"? The term, popularised by historian Adam Tooze, describes a state where multiple, seemingly distinct crises occur at the same time and interact in ways that worsen their collective impact. It is more than just facing several challenges at once.

Handling a supply chain disruption coinciding with a social media misstep is certainly difficult, but a true polycrisis involves a deeper, more insidious interaction.

A polycrisis occurs when these disparate crises actively converge, creating a cumulative effect that is far greater than the sum of its individual parts. It is a systemic entanglement where events in one domain trigger or worsen crises in others, leading to complex, cascading challenges that defy linear solutions.

Think of it like a complex ecological system. A small disruption in one part of the ecosystem – say, a change in water temperature – does not just affect one species.

It triggers a chain reaction, impacting plankton, then fish, then larger predators, potentially even altering the entire climate of the area.

Each subsequent effect feeds back into the system, making the initial disruption much more widespread and severe than it appeared at first glance.

This is the essence of polycrisis in our human systems—our economies, societies, and organisations.

The mechanisms of this amplification are varied but consistently profound:

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Direct Causation and Triggering:

One crisis can directly spark another. A severe drought (an environmental crisis) can lead to widespread crop failures (an economic crisis).

This, in turn, triggers food shortages and rising prices (a social crisis), which can escalate into social unrest or geopolitical instability (a security crisis).

An organization dependent on those crops or operating in those regions suddenly faces a multi-faceted challenge that cannot be solved by its agricultural division alone.

Exacerbation of Vulnerabilities:

An existing crisis can make an organization far more susceptible to the impact of another. Consider a company already struggling with a weak financial position from an ongoing economic downturn.

A sudden cyberattack, which might have been manageable under normal circumstances, could now push the company to the brink of collapse.

Its financial reserves are depleted, and its ability to invest in a sound recovery is severely compromised. The economic crisis critically worsens the cyber crisis.

Resource Overload and Depletion:

When multiple significant crises hit at the same time, they do not just demand individual responses; they drain shared resources.

Your communication team, legal department, IT specialists, and executive leadership all have finite capacities.

If they are simultaneously battling a data breach, a public health incident, and a major supply chain disruption, their ability to allocate suffi-

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cient attention, expertise, and funds to any single issue becomes severely compromised.

This leads to burnout, missed signals, and diminished response quality across the board.

Information Overload and "Noise":

In a polycrisis environment, the sheer volume of information, rumours, and conflicting narratives can become overwhelming.

Stakeholders—from employees to customers, investors, and the public—are bombarded with news from various fronts.

This "noise" makes it incredibly difficult for your organisation's communication to cut through, establish a clear narrative, or gain public attention and trust for any one specific issue.

Misinformation, malinformation and disinformation thrive in such chaotic environments, further complicating your efforts.

Erosion of Trust and Legitimacy:

Sustained exposure to multiple, interconnected crises can erode public trust in institutions, governments, and corporations to effectively manage challenges.

When people perceive a constant state of crisis or feel that leaders are perpetually overwhelmed, cynicism increases, and the legitimacy of authoritative sources diminishes.

This makes it harder for your organization to garner cooperation, gain public acceptance for your solutions, or restore confidence during periods of recovery.

1.2 The Failure of Traditional Linear Crisis Planning

The traditional crisis playbook was built on the assumption that you could isolate a crisis, contain it, and then resolve it before moving on to the next.

For decades, this linear, event-specific model was the bedrock of crisis communication. You likely have a playbook filled with detailed protocols for distinct scenarios: a factory fire, a product recall, an executive scandal.

These plans often feature extensive checklists, pre-approved statements, and step-by-step instructions designed to manage a contained situation from initiation to resolution.

This approach served its purpose in a less interconnected world, but it has become woefully inadequate.

The core failing of traditional crisis plans lies in their inherent rigidity. They are built on the premise that you can predict the specific nature of a crisis and apply a pre-packaged solution.

This works well for "known unknowns"—risks you can identify and prepare for individually.

A polycrisis, however, is characterised by "unknown unknowns" and unpredictable interactions.

Imagine your organization has a carefully constructed plan for a cyber-attack. It outlines steps for incident response, data recovery, and communication.

Now, the cyberattack hits, but concurrently, a major supplier experiences a natural disaster, crippling your supply chain. At the same time, a key social media influencer, unrelated to either event, launches a scathing critique of your organisation's ethical practices, which goes viral.

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Your "cyberattack plan" now offers little guidance on how to manage the convergence of these distinct threats. The rigid structure of the plan becomes a straitjacket, preventing you from adapting to the dynamic reality.

This rigidity leads to several critical shortcomings:

Tunnel Vision:

Traditional plans encourage a singular focus. When a crisis hits, teams are instructed to consult the "Product Recall Plan."

This narrow focus can create a dangerous tunnel vision, preventing communicators from seeing the broader context or recognising how the current event might be interacting with other emerging issues.

You might be so focused on drafting statements about product safety that you miss the growing public concern about your manufacturing practices, fuelled by a concurrent labor dispute.

Inhibition of Adaptive Response:

A polycrisis demands agility and continuous learning. Traditional plans, by prescribing specific actions, can inadvertently stifle this necessary adaptability.

When faced with an unforeseen twist, teams might try to force a square peg into a round hole, wasting precious time and damaging credibility.

An adaptive response means being able to pivot your message, re-evaluate your stakeholders, and overhaul your strategy on the fly.

Failure to Account for Cross-Sector Impact:

Traditional plans are typically siloed: an HR plan, an IT plan, a legal plan. They rarely contain sound frameworks for addressing the cross-pollination of these issues.

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A data breach is not just an IT problem; it has legal, financial, reputational, and HR ramifications. If your plan treats each aspect as a separate concern, you will constantly be playing catch-up.

Assumed Stability of Context:

Traditional planning often assumes a relatively stable external environment. It presumes that surrounding conditions will remain largely consistent. A polycrisis shatters this assumption.

The context itself is volatile. An economic downturn might suddenly make your planned price increase during a product shortage politically untenable. Traditional plans lack the flexibility to account for a constantly shifting backdrop.

Relying on an outdated, linear playbook in a polycrisis world carries significant risks: delayed responses, severe reputational damage, resource strain, and missed opportunities for proactive engagement.

The "crisis binder" of old, once a comforting symbol of preparedness, can now be a liability.

1.3 From Isolated Events to Interconnected Systems

To truly grasp the polycrisis, you must visualise how interconnected systems work. The modern world is not a series of independent silos; it is a dense network of dependencies.

Globalisation, just-in-time supply chains, the internet, and social media have woven our organisations into a complex web where a tremor in one corner can send shockwaves across the entire structure.

Consider a global scenario where several domains are in flux:

Climate & Environment: Unprecedented heatwaves and droughts are crippling agricultural output in key regions, while extreme flooding displaces millions in others.

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Geopolitical: An ongoing regional conflict disrupts energy supplies and critical trade routes, causing spikes in global commodity prices.

Economic: High inflation persists, central banks raise interest rates, and global supply chains remain fragile from prior disruptions.

Social: Amidst economic strain and climate migration, social inequalities become more pronounced, leading to localised protests and unrest, fuelled by sophisticated disinformation campaigns online.

Technological: At the same time, a large-scale, state-sponsored cyber-attack targets critical infrastructure in multiple countries, disrupting power grids and communication networks.

In this scenario, no single crisis stands alone. The drought is not just an environmental issue; it fuels economic inflation, worsens social unrest, and intensifies geopolitical tensions.

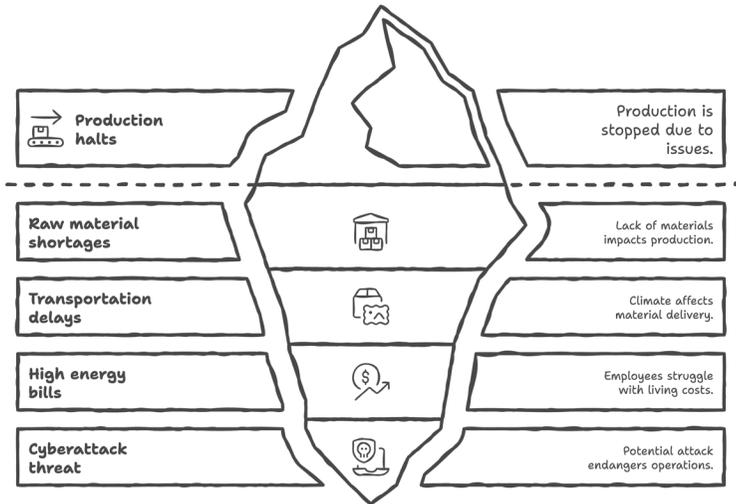
The cyberattack is not just a technical problem; it disrupts supply chains already strained by conflict and hampers communication during unrest.

Your organisation would not be dealing with five separate crises, but a single, shapeshifting, interconnected challenge where every decision impacts multiple threads.

For a manufacturing company, this might mean: raw material shortages (economic/geopolitical) compounded by climate-induced transportation delays (environmental), leading to production halts (economic), while employees struggle with high energy bills (social) and a potential cyberattack threatens operational control (technological).

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Manufacturing company faces multifaceted challenges.



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Communicating effectively in such an environment requires a profound grasp of these linkages. This new reality demands that communication managers develop a systemic view of risk.

You cannot simply react to individual incidents; you must anticipate how they might converge and amplify.

This shift from isolated events to interconnected systems is the defining characteristic of the polycrisis age.

1.4 Why Communication Managers Need New Approaches

The shift from singular crises to interconnected polycrises places an unprecedented burden on communication managers.

Your role has evolved beyond message dissemination during a specific event; you are now at the vanguard of organisational resilience.

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The traditional skills, while valuable, are insufficient. You must become architects of adaptable communication ecosystems.

In a polycrisis environment, the pressures on you are amplified across several critical dimensions:

Managing Diverse Stakeholder Expectations:

In a singular crisis, stakeholder mapping is relatively clear. In a polycrisis, their expectations become intertwined and often contradictory.

A natural hazard impacting your supply chain might mean delayed product delivery (frustrating customers), financial losses (alarming investors), and safety concerns for employees.

You need to communicate empathetic support for employees while reassuring investors about financial stability and explaining delays to customers. Balancing these needs requires a sophisticated grasp of interconnected impacts.

Combating Misinformation at an Accelerated Pace:

When multiple crises converge, they create fertile ground for rumours and disinformation. The sheer volume of information, combined with public anxiety, makes people more susceptible to false narratives.

Your traditional fact-checking strategies become overwhelmed. You are not just correcting one false claim; you are battling a deluge of conflicting narratives across multiple channels.

Maintaining Consistent Messaging Amidst Rapid Change:

A unified voice builds trust. In a polycrisis, the situation is anything but static. Variables change daily. Maintaining consistency when the underlying facts are in constant flux is an immense challenge.

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You need frameworks that allow for message adaptation without appearing contradictory. This means defining core values that remain constant, even as specific details evolve.

Handling Inter-Organisational Dependencies:

A polycrisis often involves multiple organisations—governments, NGOs, suppliers. Your communication strategy might be excellent, but if a key partner falters, it can reflect negatively on you.

You are not just managing your own narrative but often coordinating with external entities, requiring diplomatic skill and clear lines of communication.

Dealing with Exhaustion and Decision Fatigue:

Sustained periods of heightened crisis take a severe toll. The continuous pressure and emotional weight can lead to exhaustion and decision fatigue, directly impacting judgment and creativity.

Communication managers must not only manage the external crisis but also build resilient internal teams and prevent burnout.

To meet these challenges, you must embrace a new imperative built on systemic thinking, radical flexibility, and proactive horizon scanning.

This involves a mindset of continuous learning, promoting internal collaboration, and developing a profound awareness of the interconnected nature of the modern world.

The success of your organization in the polycrisis age hinges on your ability to lead this transformation.

1.5 The Cost of Unpreparedness: Real-World Examples

The theories of polycrisis are compelling on paper, but their true impact becomes painfully clear through real-world examples.

The high price of inaction is not hypothetical; it manifests in catastrophic financial losses, irreparable reputational damage, and operational paralysis.

Case Study 1: The COVID-19 Pandemic as a Global Polycrisis Trigger

The COVID-19 pandemic is a stark, global example of a trigger that exposed the vulnerabilities of linear planning. Initially a public health crisis, its tentacles rapidly reached every sector of society.

- **The Cascade:** A public health emergency triggered a global economic downturn through lockdowns. This led to massive supply chain disruptions, which in turn fuelled social and political unrest. The shift to remote work created new vulnerabilities, leading to a surge in cybersecurity threats.
- **The Communication Failure:** Many organisations, focused on traditional pandemic preparedness (e.g., sanitation), were ill-equipped to communicate through the concurrent economic collapse, supply chain snarls, and social anxieties. They lacked frameworks to address simultaneous internal and external messaging (reassuring employees about job security while telling investors about plummeting revenues) and the deep emotional impact of the human crisis.
- **The Cost:** Companies that failed to adapt quickly faced massive reputational hits, financial losses, and market share erosion. Airlines, for instance, struggled to manage customer frustration over cancellations, employee fears, and investor

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panic, often communicating inconsistent messages from the sheer scale of the problem.

Case Study 2: Boeing and the 737 MAX Crisis

The Boeing 737 MAX crisis, initially a technical and safety issue, quickly spiralled into a multifaceted polycrisis from a breakdown in communication and a failure to see interconnectedness.

- **The Cascade:** Two fatal crashes (a technical crisis) led to a global grounding of the aircraft (a regulatory crisis). This evaporated public trust (a reputational crisis) and caused billions in financial losses (a financial crisis). Internal documents then revealed a problematic corporate culture (a leadership crisis), which strained international relations (a geopolitical crisis).
- **The Communication Failure:** Boeing's initial communication was widely criticised for being slow, defensive, and lacking empathy. They focused on defending the aircraft's design (tunnel vision), failing to anticipate the broader questions of corporate culture and regulatory integrity. Their statements often felt technical and lacked genuine remorse, further alienating the public.
- **The Cost:** The cost was astronomical: over \$20 billion in financial losses, a damaged brand that will take years to fully rebuild, the resignation of its CEO, and a fundamental questioning of its engineering integrity. This was a polycrisis where a single technical flaw triggered a domino effect across every organisational domain.

Case Study 3: The Suez Canal Blockage

The grounding of the container ship Ever Given in 2021 provides a more contained example of a swift logistical crisis that immediately became a polycrisis.

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- **The Cascade:** A single ship getting stuck (a logistical crisis) delayed hundreds of other vessels, causing immediate ripple effects for global supply chains (an economic crisis). This highlighted the fragility of global trade routes, sparking discussions about maritime security (a geopolitical crisis).
- **The Communication Challenge:** For companies that depended on the canal, the disruption created a mix of challenges: managing customer expectations about delays, keeping investors informed about financial impacts, and adjusting operations to move goods through other routes.
- **The Cost:** Those organisations with flexible communication frameworks were better positioned to explain the interconnected impacts and pivot their strategies. Those caught flat-footed struggled to provide timely, accurate information, leading to customer frustration and reputational hits from a perceived lack of control.

These examples show that the landscape has shifted permanently.

The financial, reputational, and operational costs of being unprepared in a polycrisis environment are profound.

Organisations that cling to outdated, linear playbooks risk not just damage, but their very existence.

The interconnected nature of modern crises demands that you, as a communication manager, elevate your approach.