



Evidence Based Library and Information Practice

Evidence Summary

Crisis Leadership Characteristics Necessary for Public Library Personnel During Natural Disaster Situations Include Emotional Control, Empathy, Collaborative Coordination, and Community Advocacy

A Review of:

Tu-Keefner, F., Hobbs, A., & Lyons, D. (2025). Libraries on the front lines: The imperative for disaster-ready information professionals. *Journal of Library Administration*, 65(1), 79–99.
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Abstract

Objective – To determine critical leadership characteristics necessary for library staff in times of crisis and disaster.

Design – Thematic analysis of previous case studies that employed focus groups and interviews.

Setting – Specific public libraries in South Carolina, Texas, California, and Kentucky (USA) that experienced natural disaster events between 2015-2024.

Subjects – Library administrators, librarians, and staff members involved in library services during crisis situations.

Methods – Transcripts from focus groups and interviews, conducted during site visits and online meetings, were thematically analyzed using Boin et al.'s (2005) five critical tasks of crisis leaders and Goleman's (1998, 2004) five components of emotional intelligence at work.

Main Results – The authors' qualitative analysis reveals evidence of five effective crisis leadership characteristics that include: 1) self-awareness and initiative in times of crisis that result in community-first engagement initiatives; 2) the ability to maintain emotional control and empathy in order to prioritize staff and community needs; 3) goal oriented and collaborative decision making and coordination of services; 4) provision of clear and credible communication of information; and 5) learning and growing from experiences in order to make decisions in the moment but also to plan and train for future situations.

Conclusion – Based on their analysis, the authors present and prioritize ten key recommendations for crisis and disaster management aimed at enhancing community engagement. The authors also recommend that LIS education programs incorporate instruction on key crisis leadership characteristics and emphasize the importance of continuing education and professional development. They highlight the need for collaborative planning efforts during non-crisis periods to ensure libraries are adequately prepared for future emergencies.

Commentary

This analysis adds to the body of literature that recognizes the importance of public library services during times of crisis and disaster. Drawing from their previous research collaborations in this area, including lessons learned from the lived experience of library personnel during crisis and disaster situations, the authors' use of focus group and interview data was appropriate evidence of effective crisis leadership characteristics, in alignment with both Boin et al. (2005) and Goleman (1998, 2004).

The study was assessed using *The CAT: A generic critical appraisal tool* developed by Perryman and Rathbun-Grubb (2014). The purpose of the study and background provided by the literature review were clear and relevant. However, since the authors collected the data used for this thematic analysis as part of previous research, there is a lack of information provided regarding methodological design. Participants were recruited through purposive sampling based on crisis location; however, the total number of participants and case specific figures are not provided and details about the research method are only generalized. While the study provides a set of research questions for the broader case study series, none directly address the specific topic of crisis leadership characteristics. The absence of focus group or interview questions further limits the reader's ability to assess the depth of inquiry and leaves the question of what additional insights on crisis leadership might have emerged if explicitly explored in the original case studies. The authors do not provide limitations, and thus the reader would need to read the authors' previously published works to determine the strength of the data collection process. This lack of information within this specific study creates uncertainty regarding the validity and reliability of the data.

Though the omissions of this study are concerning, there is value in the timely recommendations presented: the authors offer five effective crisis leadership characteristics and ten community focused tips as practical takeaways for crisis and disaster management across all types of libraries and community organizations. The authors include statements that their results demonstrate the value of public libraries to communities during times of crisis, but did not analyze or include comments from community members, suggesting an avenue for future research. Additionally, a reminder of the importance of collaborative planning during non-crisis periods remains essential to ensuring libraries and their communities are ready for future challenges.

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