

### STRATEGIC LEADERSHIP AND CRISIS MANAGEMENT IN TERROR AND ACTIVE THREAT INCIDENTS: INTERAGENCY APPROACHES FOR RESILIENT PUBLIC SAFETY SYSTEMS

Prof. Dr. Raphael Röttinger, Eugen Röttinger, PhD(c)

#### ABSTRACT

The purpose of this conceptual paper is to identify strategic leadership as one of the key capabilities required by interagency crisis management. Terrorist and active threat incidents are characterized by rapidly changing conditions, ambiguity and time constraints. Therefore, police, fire departments, ambulance services, government agencies and elected officials will be forced to operate under pressure while simultaneously providing both the operational clarity necessary for effective incident operations and sufficient trust among the public to provide support during a crisis.

This research paper presents a conceptual model to integrate existing knowledge from the fields of crisis management and public safety to demonstrate how strategic leadership can improve public safety's ability to prepare for, respond to and recover from terrorist and active threat incidents. Specifically, it provides a framework for addressing four specific areas where strategic leadership has been found to positively affect public safety organizations' response to terrorism and Active Threats including leadership under uncertainty, failure to coordinate across agencies, communications protocols, and learning organization post-incident. It also offers recommendations regarding training, governance and interagency planning based upon a review of the existing body of knowledge.

**Key-Words:** Strategic leadership, crisis management, active threat incidents, interagency co-ordination, public safety resilience, emergency preparedness.

**How to cite this article:** Röttinger R, Röttinger E. Strategic Leadership and Crisis Management in Terror and Active Threat Incidents: Interagency Approaches for Resilient Public Safety Systems. *Int J Drug Deliv Technol.* 2026;16(62s): 515-525. DOI: 10.25258/ijddt.16.62s.58

**Source of support:** Nil.

**Conflict of interest:** None.

#### Introduction

When terrorist attacks or active threats occur, the safety of people is placed in jeopardy. In contrast to fires, transportation accidents and natural disasters, which can cause widespread damage and disruption, terrorist attacks, mass shootings, stabbings, car ramming and other types of coordinated threat incidents involve multiple moving parts. While all of these events can be devastating, the nature of terrorist attacks and mass shooting events require rapid responses. As law enforcement officers, firefighters, paramedics, politicians and government employees work to protect the public and address immediate needs, they must do so with limited information about the scope of the attack and/or shooter(s). Thus, these types of incidents create significant challenges to providing timely and effective emergency services (Hick et al., 2016; Schorscher, Kippnich, Meybohm, & Wurmb, 2022; Thompson, Rehn, Lossius, & Lockey, 2014).

In addition to the rapidity of such events, their unpredictable nature and the fact that they frequently receive extensive media coverage adds to the complexity of responding. Since the beginning of an attack or a series of attacks is often uncertain, responders may find themselves operating in a state of flux. During these initial phases, there will typically be incomplete information available to them regarding the extent of injuries or damage and the number of

individuals involved. Moreover, because the situation may rapidly evolve and develop over time (within minutes), decision-makers will likely be forced to make decisions based upon incomplete information (Ansell, Boin, & Keller, 2010; Boin, 'T Hart, Stern, & Sundelius, 2016; Thompson et al., 2014).

Responders to such events will frequently encounter conflicting priorities. Law enforcement personnel will focus on stopping or containing the attacker; emergency medical service providers will attempt to reach, triage and treat injured victims; fire departments will assist in evacuating individuals from buildings or other locations where they may be sheltered from potential harm; administrative crisis teams will be responsible for coordinating resources, maintaining continuity in essential public services and supporting elected officials who will be providing direction, reassurance and accountability. These different roles and responsibilities will not always follow sequentially. Rather, they will often overlap (Boin et al., 2016; Hick et al., 2016; Power, Alcock, Philpot, & Levine, 2024).

Therefore, the primary issue with respect to managing terroristic type incidents is not solely focused on effectively managing risk at the location of the assault. Rather, it involves the ability of various stakeholders to communicate and collaborate across agency boundaries. Terroristic type incidents highlight the connections among entities. Such incidents

also assess if each entity has defined responsibilities for actions taken by each, if information flows sufficiently among parties, if communication protocols among stakeholders are aligned and if the structural frameworks for leadership within each entity are able to withstand additional pressure generated by each subsequent event. Therefore, even competent individual entities may struggle to perform effectively when the greater public safety system lacks the mechanisms necessary for collaboration (Kapucu, 2006; Power et al., 2024; Steen-Tveit & Erik Munkvold, 2021).

Public safety resilience is not just dependent upon tactical effectiveness. Rather it is also dependent upon the quality of leadership within entities prior to an event occurring, during an event and after an event has occurred (Boin et al., 2016; Committee on Increasing National Resilience to Hazards and Disasters & Committee on Science, Engineering, and Public Policy, 2012).

Given that interagency coordination is difficult to achieve during crisis situations, strategic leadership offers a promising approach to improving performance in this area. Strategic leadership does not replace operational command nor does it limit itself to political leadership in a traditional sense. Rather, strategic leadership can be viewed as an integrative function linking operational command, interagency coordination, political accountability and public communications. By defining priorities in times of uncertainty, creating consensus among agencies toward a common mission, facilitating consistent decision-making processes and fostering confidence among members of the public, strategic leadership enhances the resilience of public safety systems during high-threat events (Boin et al., 2016; Waugh & Streib, 2006).

There are several areas in which existing literature provides valuable insight into problems associated with crisis management. Studies and professional guides on incident command offer suggestions for organizing an operational response to an emergency. Research on emergency management addresses issues related to preparedness, coordination and crisis structures. Literature examining crisis communications discusses elements of public messages, establishing credibility and trust and communicating information in a manner that satisfies public concerns (Buck, Trainor, & Aguirre, 2006; Reynolds & Seeger, 2005; Waugh & Streib, 2006). There are several articles that examine specific challenges faced by first responders in relation to terrorist acts and active shooter incidents (Hick et al., 2016; Jones, Kue, Mitchell, Eblan, & Dyer, 2014; Schorscher et al., 2022). However, although there are numerous examples of excellent work being done in these areas, much of this work remains somewhat disconnected from others. An example would include works that examine strategic leadership as a key component of resilient public safety

systems in response to terror and active threat incidents.

This article seeks to fill this void by developing a theoretical framework for strategic leadership in interagency crisis management. The author draws from relevant bodies of literature including crisis management, emergency response, leadership studies and organizational learning. This article seeks to synthesize existing research in order to translate findings into a functional conceptual model for use by professionals. The author believes that this model can help guide strategic leaders in strengthening the capacity of public safety systems to prepare for, respond to and recover from high-threat events. The model has four interdependent dimensions: leadership in times of uncertainty, interagency coordination, crisis communication protocols and post-event learning. When combined, these dimensions outline how strategic leadership can enhance the resilience of public safety systems.

Thus, the overarching research question is: "How can strategic leadership improve interagency crisis management and public safety resilience in terror and active threat incidents?"

Ultimately, this article seeks to provide meaningful contributions to both academic discourse and professional practice. To researchers it provides a well-defined method for integrating considerations of leadership and coordination within analyses of high-threat events. To practitioners it identifies leadership functions that can be integrated into governance structures, training initiatives, communication plans and after-action evaluations. The fundamental premise of this article is straightforward: Terrorist-type incidents are not merely demonstrations of tactical response abilities. They are also measures of an entire public safety system's ability to function and collaborate under extreme duress and learn from its experiences afterward.

## Literature Review

### Crisis management in terror and active threat incidents

Terror and active threat incidents differ from most common emergencies because they occur in an uncertain, rapidly changing and poorly defined situation. Responders will typically not know at the start of an incident how many perpetrators there are, whether all threats have been neutralized, where victims are located, and if additional attacks are being planned. The scene itself may be dangerous, disorganized or shifting during the response. For example, a vehicle attack can take place over multiple locations, while an active shooter may move from one building to another. Similarly, a knife attack in a public space can create panic and subsequent reports that confuse the scope of danger. These characteristics create a high level of difficulty in initial assessments and contribute to a continuing dynamic tension between responding quickly and cautiously

(Boin et al., 2016; Hick et al., 2016; Jones et al., 2014; Thompson et al., 2014).

Another major distinction exists between security and rescue. While natural disaster or technical accident scenes may be dangerous, the danger is usually non-adaptive. That is, in these types of emergencies, the hazard (e.g., windstorm, fire) does not adapt its behavior to interfere with rescue activities. However, in the case of an active threat setting, the perpetrator(s) may continue to act, hide, flee, etc. creating a tactical environment in which law enforcement's primary goal is to stop, or at least contain the threat; emergency medical personnel must navigate through restricted areas to reach and treat the injured; fire department resources are used for search/rescue/evacuation/lighting/hazardous materials mitigation; and local government officials must address larger-scale public impacts such as family assistance/sheltering/traffic control/public messaging (Hick et al., 2016; Jones et al., 2014; Schorscher et al., 2022).

In addition to their operational dimensions, terrorist and active threat incidents also exhibit large amounts of visible communication and politics. Thus, not only do these types of incidents present operational challenges for public safety organizations. They also challenge those same organizations' communication systems and overall adaptive capability. As such, the literature on crisis management indicates that these types of incidents not only test the ability of individuals to respond effectively. They also test the organizational structure of government agencies and the ability of government agencies to communicate effectively (Boin et al., 2016; Longstaff & Yang, 2008; Reynolds & Seeger, 2005).

Therefore, public safety organizations cannot simply view these types of incidents as "exceptions" to normal planning processes. Rather, these types of incidents should be viewed as infrequent but predictable forms of stress on the capabilities of emergency governments. Therefore, it is essential for public safety organizations to recognize the potential for these types of incidents and plan accordingly (Boin et al., 2016; Hick et al., 2016; Schorscher et al., 2022).

#### **Strategic leadership under uncertainty**

A strategic leader's role in managing crises should be differentiated from the role of a commander who controls directly resources and their use in tactical actions. A strategic leader directs his/her efforts at a higher level of organization. He/she defines direction and establishes priorities, provides room for decision-making, and facilitates collective responses. While strategically-oriented leaders do not remove themselves from the crisis response effort they are not responsible for making the day-to-day decisions of an Incident Commander. The strategic leader's role is to link short-term operational needs with organizational commitments, political accountability and long-term resilience (Boin et al., 2016; Waugh & Streib, 2006).

The uncertainty associated with the threats posed by terrorism and other forms of violent acts against civilians is a fundamental component of the strategic leadership challenge. Decisions frequently must be made while incomplete information exists. The delay in taking action as a result of waiting for more complete information may lead to loss of life. On the other hand, the rapid deployment of limited numbers of personnel and/or resources based upon incomplete information may generate additional risk. Therefore, strategic leaders must develop skills related to working under ambiguous circumstances. Ambiguity refers to situations in which there is insufficient information available to make confident decisions. Strategic leaders must reduce confusion (i.e., clarify the nature of the unknown) rather than attempting to provide clarity where none exists. Leaders must identify what is currently known, what remains unknown and the assumptions that serve as the basis for current action. These types of activities are particularly important during large-scale events involving multiple stakeholders who view the event through various professional lenses (Boin et al., 2016; Hick et al., 2016; Kapucu, 2006).

Another key aspect of strategic leadership involves prioritizing among competing demands. Terrorist attacks create numerous competing requirements including rescuing injured individuals, securing the affected area, providing information to the general public, supporting family members of those affected, protecting critical infrastructure, maintaining transportation corridors and preparing for media inquiries. All of these functions cannot be given equal attention at the same time. Strategic leaders assist in establishing an order of priority and articulating such priorities within the relevant systems. Establishing priorities during high-threat scenarios is a technically-driven activity as well as having significant ethical and political implications since decisions regarding access, evacuations, communications and resource allocations have a direct impact on public perceptions of governmental responsiveness (Boin et al., 2016; Hick et al., 2016; Longstaff & Yang, 2008).

Finally, strategic leadership assists in defining lines of authority. During large-scale emergencies fragmented authority among responding organizations becomes a significant barrier to effective coordination. Responding organizations may act hesitantly due to unclear guidance, duplicate efforts in order to ensure some action is taken, or await further instructions from headquarters that never materialize. Effective strategic leadership does not require centralized control over each operational detail. However, it does require that roles, escalation procedures and decision authorities be identified prior to the emergency. When improvisations occur (and they inevitably do), such improvisations will be more successful if they take place within a previously-agreed framework. As such, strategic leadership provides a

linkage between immediate crisis performance and long-term system resilience. Strategically oriented leaders prepare organizations to both respond effectively to emergencies as well as retain coherence during periods when routine operations are severely disrupted (Boin et al., 2016; Committee on Increasing National Resilience to Hazards and Disasters & Committee on Science, Engineering, and Public Policy, 2012; Hick et al., 2016; Waugh & Streib, 2006).

#### **Interagency coordination and public safety systems**

A large number of crisis management failures do not result from an absolute lack of ability. Instead they occur due to failure of alignment at the interagency level (or boundary) where capable organizations interact. Organizations involved in public safety include those with various mandates, different cultures and differing ways of operation. Police departments approach active threats primarily through a lens of security, threat reduction and tactical control. Emergency Medical Services (EMS) provide triage, medical treatment and transportation. Fire departments generally respond to emergencies with a technical, rescue and risk mitigation perspective. Administration responds to crises through legal, political and financial frameworks. All perspectives are valid. Conflict arises when these perspectives are not appropriately integrated (Boin et al., 2016; Power et al., 2024; Steen-Tveit & Erik Munkvold, 2021).

There are multiple ways that coordination among agencies fails. Agency responsibilities can be ambiguous, particularly as the incident moves from a tactical level into a larger crisis management context. Agencies may also have disparate views regarding the situation, with some agencies using entirely different information channels or definitions to understand the situation. Different terminology used by different agencies can create conflict. An agency's use of a particular term will likely have a completely different meaning in another agency. In addition, there are parallel communications networks, which can lead to confusion in message delivery and/or delay in making decisions. Although procedures for escalating situations are typically understood in principle, agencies rarely practice escalation procedures in realistic conditions (Davidson, Carter, Drury, Amlôt, & Haslam, 2025; Kapucu, 2006; Steen-Tveit & Erik Munkvold, 2021).

Therefore, the literature emphasizes coordinated planning, training and leadership structures to develop effective interagency coordination. Coordination among agencies prior to an incident is essential and should not be left until the time of the incident. This includes developing a shared understanding of how each agency will function together, including common doctrine, training exercises, liaison relationships and procedures (Hick et al., 2016; Kapucu, 2006; Power et al., 2024). Examples of models for coordinating agencies' actions include Incident Command Systems, Unified Commands and other

national-level coordination mechanisms, as they establish mechanisms for distributing authority and facilitating the distribution of information between agencies (Ansell et al., 2010; Buck et al., 2006). The institutional structure supporting coordination will vary depending upon the country. However, the overall issue is the same. Agencies engaged in public safety must have a mechanism to coordinate their actions so that they may continue to act separately yet form a cohesive response mechanism (Ansell et al., 2010; Power et al., 2024).

In terrorist and active threat incidents, the operational environment may rapidly change, requiring agencies to adapt their posture numerous times during the course of the incident. For example, a scene that was originally designated as a medical emergency may be subsequently designated as a crime scene. A previously identified safe area may become unsafe again. A communication made to reassure the public may require revision after receipt of additional intelligence (Brown, Power, & Conchie, 2021; Hick et al., 2016; Steen-Tveit & Erik Munkvold, 2021). Therefore, coordination among agencies requires something more than simply having a plan that is agreed upon. It also requires a shared capacity to update the plan. Strategic leadership supports this by treating coordination as a continuous process rather than a singular command decision (Ansell et al., 2010; Boin et al., 2016).

**Crisis communication and post incident learning**  
High-threat incidents require that communication become a key part of your crisis management approach, not just an additional "supporting" activity (Reynolds & Seeger, 2005).

Communication internally provides the foundation for situational awareness, role clarification, and resource coordination among first responders. First responders depend on having current and accurate information related to the nature and location of the threat, casualty locations, emergency access routes, command structure(s), and changes to operational priorities. In addition, first responders rely upon receiving warnings when previously held assumptions are no longer valid. Delays in, or inconsistency within, internal communications can result in direct risks associated with operational decisions (Arietti & Freilich, 2024; Kapucu, 2006; Steen-Tveit & Erik Munkvold, 2021).

Similarly, external communications provide critical support to the public during emergencies. As such, it is essential that authorities provide timely information regarding the nature of the incident, the aspects of the incident which remain unknown, and the appropriate course of action for members of the community. At the same time, authorities must counteract rumors while avoiding the excessive release of unverified information (Boin & McConnell, 2007; Reynolds & Seeger, 2005). Additionally, authorities must ensure protection of their current operations.

Examples include providing police tactical information, releasing casualty data prior to verification, or disclosing suspect locations prematurely (Boin et al., 2016; Reynolds & Seeger, 2005).

Therefore, crisis communications exist at the crossroads of transparency, reassuring the public, and maintaining security discipline. If appropriately integrated into crisis structures and supported by relevant policies, Public Information Officers can assist in translating organizational knowledge into understandable messages for the public (Boin et al., 2016; Committee on Increasing National Resilience to Hazards and Disasters & Committee on Science, Engineering, and Public Policy, 2012; Kapucu, 2006). Trust is repeatedly mentioned throughout this literature. Members of the public evaluate government performance based on both the ultimate success or failure of their efforts to respond to the disaster and/or crime as well as the degree to which they perceive the government's communication regarding their efforts to be transparent, honest, and consistent. Acknowledging uncertainty can sometimes be viewed as being more trustworthy than providing false assurances of certainty. Maintaining trust will require disciplined decision making by those in positions of leadership who may face considerable political and media pressures (Boin et al., 2016; Longstaff & Yang, 2008; Reynolds & Seeger, 2005). Therefore, strategic leaders will need to develop and implement communication protocols before a potential crisis occurs, including definitions of responsibilities, approval processes, Public Information Officer roles, and mechanisms for coordinating both operational and political messaging (Kapucu, 2006; Longstaff & Yang, 2008).

Finally, the last theme discussed was post incident learning. Once the immediate danger posed by a terrorist attack or active shooter has passed, the public safety system moves to a new phase. Instead of responding to an unfolding incident, the focus shifts from response to recovery, review, adaptation. There are several methods available for conducting after action reviews, documenting lessons learned, and facilitating debriefings (Arietti & Freilich, 2024; Boin et al., 2016). However, these activities alone do not represent enough. In order for learning to occur, there must be some mechanism established to convert findings into changed policies and procedures, training programs and exercises involving multiple agencies and jurisdictions. Failure to establish such mechanisms means that reviews of responses to previous events will likely serve only as symbolic documents lacking tangible impact on future responses (Arietti & Freilich, 2024; Moynihan, 2008; Schorscher et al., 2022).

A learning organization views incidents as opportunities to increase understanding of its systems. A learning organization does not ask simply what each individual responder did during a particular incident.

Rather, it seeks to understand how structures, assumptions and interfaces affected how responders performed (Boin et al., 2016; Moynihan, 2008). Were responsibilities clearly defined? Was information transferred between agencies? Were there sufficient protocols in place to support communication among agencies? Did leaders possess the necessary authority and support to make decisions? Asking these questions connects post incident learning back to strategic leadership (Arietti & Freilich, 2024; Kapucu, 2006). Resiliency is not developed through a complete avoidance of failures. Rather, resiliency develops through identifying weaknesses in systems and developing better ways to prepare for the next high threat event (Boin et al., 2016; Committee on Increasing National Resilience to Hazards and Disasters & Committee on Science, Engineering, and Public Policy, 2012; Schorscher et al., 2022).

### **Research Methodology**

The methodology of this study combines a structured narrative literature review with conceptual framework development. A structured narrative literature review was chosen because the subject area studied is interdisciplinarity, so it could not be appropriately examined using the narrow scope of a single discipline. Strategic leadership during terror and active threat events affects many areas of research and practice. These include crisis management, emergency management, public administration, public safety, security studies and leadership studies. Therefore, the goal of the review was to provide an integrated frame of reference for conceptual and practice-oriented knowledge regarding interagency crisis management as opposed to measuring the impact of a well-defined treatment, comparing empirically based results among studies within a very narrow band of samples or testing a particular causal relationship.

Therefore, it was not thought that a completely systematic review would be required for the purposes of this paper. The study does not have the objective of calculating effect sizes, testing a given causal relationship or comparing one operational model with others. It has a conceptual focus. Terror and active threat events create very complex coordination requirements which need to be interpreted through multiple bodies of literature. Because of its ability to allow for transparent identification and synthesis of pertinent literature along with sufficient flexibility to incorporate theoretical, empirical and professional contributions from other related disciplines, a structured narrative review is appropriate for addressing this type of conceptual issue.

Multiple search routes were employed to conduct the literature search. Academic databases were searched first. Then, complementary search routes were employed. Included in these searches were Google Scholar, Scopus, Web of Science and PubMed. Ad-

ditional selected journals and professional publications in the areas of crisis management, emergency response, public administration and security studies were reviewed. Also, reference lists from relevant publications were searched to facilitate "snowballing" especially if the references cited pointed to established concepts, frameworks or guides that were not readily identifiable via keywords.

Search terms used in the search process included combinations of strategic leadership, crisis leadership, terror incident, active shooter, active threat, interagency coordination, emergency management, public safety resilience, crisis communication, after action review. Search terms were used either singly or in conjunction with each other in order to identify literature that dealt with leadership, coordination, communication and learning in high threat, high stress or complex crisis situations.

Literature was considered relevant (included) whenever it provided insight(s) into at least one of the major analytical categories being discussed in this paper. These categories were: (1) Leadership Under Uncertainty, (2) Interagency Coordination, (3) Crisis Communication Protocols, and (4) Post Incident Learning. Literature considered included academic journal articles, conceptual papers, professional reports, guidance documents where such literature provided insight into how to understand public safety responses in high-pressure, multi-agency, security-related crisis contexts. Conversely, literature was excluded from consideration when there was no direct relevance to public safety, crisis management, interagency coordination or high-threat incidents.

Analysis proceeded on the basis of thematic synthesis. Relevant arguments, concepts, and findings from the literature were systematically identified and extracted and grouped by category according to the four analytical categories listed above. Categories were then integrated into a conceptual framework. Results of this paper are thus not empirical findings in the strictest sense. Rather, they represent synthesized conceptual findings developed from existing literature which are organized into a framework explaining how strategic leadership can improve interagency crisis management and public safety resilience during terrorist and active threats.

#### **Ethical Statement**

This report is based solely on publicly accessible, peer-reviewed scientific research, published professional works and official policies. No interviews, surveys, observations or other types of primary data collection were carried out. Therefore, this study involved no human subjects and did not process confidential or personal information. Additionally, operational sensitivity in terms of exposing emergency responders, law enforcement, public agencies and/or critical infrastructure was avoided. For these reasons formal ethics committee approval was not required prior to developing this report

#### **Results**

The conceptual synthesis indicates that strategic leadership contributes to interagency crisis management through four closely connected capability areas. These areas are not separate phases of an incident. Rather, they describe leadership functions that become relevant before, during and after terror and active threat events. The four areas are leadership under uncertainty, interagency coordination, crisis communication protocols and post incident learning.

#### **Strategic leadership under uncertainty**

The primary responsibility of the first capability area is to lead in an uncertain environment. Terrorist and active shooter attacks do not typically begin with all parties having a full understanding of the situation. Situational awareness is usually fragmented (limited) and/or conflicting as well as changing rapidly. Therefore, strategic leaders need to provide direction but should avoid giving the impression that they have absolute certainty regarding the event (Ansell et al., 2010; Boin et al., 2016; Hick et al., 2016).

Strategic leadership needs to quickly determine the highest priority tasks, inform stakeholders regarding what is currently known and what is still unknown, and facilitate decision-making despite ongoing ambiguity. This type of decision-making is critical when multiple organizations possess partial intelligence regarding the same event. Operational intelligence is often divided among police, fire departments, emergency medical services, crisis teams and local government entities. Without a common operating picture and a clear decision process, the total response will likely be delayed and potentially inconsistent. To mitigate these risks, strategic leadership needs to clearly articulate roles and responsibilities, reduce/eliminate decision hurdles and create guiding principles for how to operate. It would be impractical to send every operational-level decision up the chain-of-command at a time when the event is developing rapidly (Boin et al., 2016; Kapucu, 2006; Steen-Tveit & Erik Munkvold, 2021).

#### **Interagency coordination as a resilience capability**

The second aspect of building capabilities for disaster preparedness in relation to terrorism is interagency collaboration. The conceptual synthesis suggests that coordination should be viewed from a strategic perspective and not solely as an operational issue. When there are multiple agencies working together during a critical event, public safety becomes stronger and more effective as each agency performs its own job function yet collaborates with other agencies (Committee on Increasing National Resilience to Hazards and Disasters & Committee on Science, Engineering, and Public Policy, 2012; Kapucu, 2006; Power et al., 2024).

The terrorist attacks of September 11th clearly illustrated how interfaces between organizations were made very visible. Police officers focused on suppressing threats to people, securing the scene. Emergency Medical Services (EMS) focused on triaging

patients, treating them and transporting them. Fire departments provided rescue services, evacuated buildings and/or provided specialized equipment. Cities and local governments and their respective administrative staffs were responsible for managing resources, providing information to the public and addressing broader impacts on the community. Each of these viewpoints is needed. However, they all can cause friction (Hick et al., 2016; Kapucu, 2006; Steen-Tveit & Erik Munkvold, 2021).

By creating a shared approach to planning, a common understanding of the situation and agreements regarding communications among participating agencies along with agreed upon definitions of role assignments, strategic leadership can help alleviate many of the problems caused by differing views of the same problem. Additionally, strategic leadership provides for training transitioning between tactical, operational and strategic levels. A terrorist attack is typically a multi-level event and therefore does not remain confined within one level of command. Operational decisions made at the scene will often have immediate political, legal, and communication implications. Conversely, strategic decisions made prior to the event may limit or impact operational access to resources and public behavior (Boin et al., 2016; Brown et al., 2021; Steen-Tveit & Erik Munkvold, 2021).

#### **Crisis communication protocols**

The third capability area focuses on crisis communication. Crisis communication will require some type of pre-incident planning. In many cases improvised messaging is insufficient for managing a high-pressure situation with significant visibility to the public. Therefore there should be a plan for communications among emergency management, response organizations (e.g. incident command, crisis staff), public officials, authorities, citizens and the media and other stakeholders (Boin et al., 2016; Kapucu, 2006; Reynolds & Seeger, 2005).

Public Information Officers or comparable communication roles can play an essential role as "bridging" personnel. The effectiveness of these personnel will depend on their level of integration within the crisis management organization's structure and if they receive timely operational information (Kapucu, 2006; Reynolds & Seeger, 2005). Crisis communication goes beyond simply communicating facts. This includes building credibility and trust, maintaining social and public order, reducing uncertainty and protecting the legitimacy of government. Conversely poor communication during a crisis can have negative effects. Statements from public officials which are delayed, conflicting, or speculative could decrease public confidence in those same officials and potentially increase the complexity of the operational response (Boin et al., 2016; Longstaff & Yang, 2008; Reynolds & Seeger, 2005).

#### **Learning organization and post incident adaptation**

The fourth of these capability areas addresses post-incident learning. After the immediate danger has passed, the organization enters a phase of institutional processing. Strategic leadership is important during this time, because, although structured debriefs, after action reviews, and open, transparent error analyses are required in order to facilitate learning from an incident, such activities are merely the beginning of the process. For post-incident learning to be effective or "meaningful", the results of the investigation must then be used to revise training programs, update Standard Operating Procedures (SOP's), and improve interagency exercises (Arietti & Freilich, 2024; Boin et al., 2016; Moynihan, 2008). Therefore, public safety agencies should treat post-incident review as an institutional capacity rather than simply a reporting requirement. Strategic leaders must be responsible for ensuring that difficult findings are not ignored, and that the identified weaknesses are corrected. In this way, strategic leadership increases organizational resilience through both successful responses to incidents as well as organizational adaptations after failures, friction and uncertainty (Arietti & Freilich, 2024; Committee on Increasing National Resilience to Hazards and Disasters & Committee on Science, Engineering, and Public Policy, 2012; Schorscher et al., 2022).

#### **Analysis**

The findings show that strategic leadership helps strengthen the ability of organizations to handle crises by connecting operational action with inter-agency governance, public communication and organizational learning rather than taking over operational control. That distinction is important. In terror and active threat situations strategic leadership is different than Incident Command. Strategic leadership is not only about managing political crises either. It exists in the area between the operation itself and the rest of the public safety system and the public authorities responsible for accountability, credibility, and continuity.

Operational success is essential. However, operational success alone will not meet the challenges presented by terror and active threat events. Terror and active threat events produce multiple crises at one time. A security crisis exists due to the ongoing risk posed by the potential continued presence of the terrorist(s). Medical crises exist due to the need for immediate triage, treatment and evacuation of casualties. Information crises arise as a result of incomplete and/or conflicting reports regarding the nature of the attack. Trust crises exist due to the expectation of credible and decisive action by public authorities and emergency organizations. Local government and political leaders must address administrative, legal and public expectations while simultaneously addressing these various crises. As such, the layers of

STRATEGIC LEADERSHIP AND CRISIS MANAGEMENT IN TERROR AND ACTIVE THREAT INCIDENTS: INTERAGENCY APPROACHES FOR RESILIENT PUBLIC SAFETY SYSTEMS

crisis cannot be addressed effectively unless there is cooperation among them.

That is why interagency governance becomes so critical. Joint training and familiarization with each other's roles and processes are helpful. Yet, they do not eliminate the structural barriers to effective collaboration. The structural barriers are created by confusion regarding decision-making authority, escalation protocols, and communication protocols. Therefore, strategic leadership creates these structural elements prior to the occurrence of a crisis. Some examples of what needs to occur include establishment of common leadership standards, shared planning practices, mutual understanding regarding information sharing and communication protocols between operational, tactical and strategic levels. The utility of establishing these relationships will become apparent during times of urgency where decisions must be made rapidly without having ample opportunity for coordination.

Table 1 summarizes how selected strategic leadership functions can be translated into interagency crisis management practice.

Leadership function	Crisis management challenge	Inter-agency implication	Practical measure
Sense-making	Fragmented information	Shared situational awareness	Joint briefing cycles
Decision alignment	Unclear authority	Faster coordination	Predefined escalation pathways
Communication discipline	Rumours and public uncertainty	Public trust	Coordinated public messaging
Organizational learning	Repeated failures	System adaptation	After action review and SOP revision

**Table 1: Strategic leadership functions and their interagency crisis management practice**

From a perspective of resilience, strategic leaders' primary contributions extend beyond the initial reactive actions in response to events of higher threat. In addition to preparing, absorbing, adapting and learning through events (the four phases of resilience), the initial rapid responses do not guarantee continued organizational learning after the event. Furthermore, having responsive "tactical" units does not necessarily mean that there will be sufficient administrative support for them. Therefore, strategic leaders bridge the gap between rapid crisis management and longer-term institutional growth.

As such, several practical implications result from this conceptual analysis. High-threat incidents provide opportunities for public safety agencies to create a common leadership doctrine or at least establish some guiding principles among their member agencies. Active shooter/incident training should take the form of simulated active threats during multi-agency training exercises as opposed to generic emergency preparedness training. Agencies should develop pre-incident agreements on situational awareness sharing protocols and communication standards. Public Information Officers and similar agency personnel should have designated operational access and clearly defined roles within the crisis structure. Systematically identifying and incorporating lessons learned from past incidents into new Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs), training programs, and interagency exercises would allow agencies to improve their ability to manage future crises.

However, there is one critical caveat. Excessive standardization due to strategic planning is a possible outcome of this type of analysis. Due to the highly unpredictable nature of terror and active threat incidents, standardization could potentially be counterproductive if it limits adaptability to emerging risks or local conditions. As such, the proposed framework should be viewed as a directional guide rather than a strictly prescribed operational plan.

**Conclusion**

This paper examines how strategic leadership affects the ability of public safety agencies to manage interagency crises and enhance their overall public safety resilience during terrorist attacks and active shooter threats. The fundamental thesis of the paper is that strategic leadership is a core competency for resilient public safety systems. The utility of strategic leadership resides not in supplanting the authority of operational commanders, but in fostering connections between operational actions, interagency governance, public communications and organizational learning during periods of intense pressure and uncertainty.

Four dimensions were identified through which this theoretical contribution can be viewed. First, strategic leadership aids decision-making under uncertain conditions by enabling agencies to prioritize, delineate responsibility and take action in situations where there is insufficient information to make informed decisions. Second, strategic leadership enhances interagency coordination by establishing common structures, standardized planning protocols and predictable communication channels between law enforcement, firefighting agencies, emergency medical service providers, crisis response teams and government agencies. Third, strategic leadership provides a rational basis for developing a comprehensive strategy for managing the public communications component of crises. While the primary purpose of public communication is to disseminate information regarding a particular event or series of

events, it also serves to promote public trust in the institutions responsible for responding to emergencies, ensure continuity of operations among emergency responders and establish credibility for those who are providing oversight functions. Fourth, strategic leadership facilitates post-incident analysis and learning by assuring that post-crisis analyses (after-action reviews) and lessons learned from previous responses to emergencies are converted into training programs, standard operating procedures and collaborative working relationships among various stakeholders.

From a practical standpoint, it is apparent that public safety agencies and governments cannot develop strategic leadership solely in response to an incident. Time is extremely limited in high-threat situations to negotiate, communicate, plan or improvise. As such, strategic leadership needs to be developed prior to the occurrence of a crisis through the development of governance models, agency-based training programs, defined roles and responsibilities for personnel involved in emergency responses, established communication paths and formalized mechanisms for learning.

While the paper has significant contributions in terms of understanding how strategic leadership can enhance interagency crisis management and public safety resilience during terrorism or active shooter incidents, it also has several limitations. Primarily, while this paper was written using a structured narrative approach to reviewing relevant literature, and while the paper identifies a conceptual model for understanding how strategic leadership contributes to enhancing interagency coordination, the paper does not empirically validate the conceptual model. Additionally, while the author did identify many of the elements that have been previously suggested to contribute to successful interagency coordination in response to emergencies, the study does not provide primary empirical evidence to validate the framework. Therefore, while the author's contribution to the body of knowledge on this topic is largely analytical and integrative in nature, future research would need to empirically validate the conceptual model presented within this paper in order for it to become widely accepted. There are at least three areas where future research could build upon the theoretical framework developed in this paper. Future researchers could use empirical methodologies to investigate if all four dimensions of strategic leadership are consistently exhibited in responses to terrorism or active shooter attacks. Additional comparative case studies could be conducted examining how different nations organize strategic leadership in their public safety systems. Finally, additional research should focus on how recent advances in digital situational awareness technology and real-time communication technology impact the practice of strategic leadership in emergency response systems.

**Bibliography**

- Ansell, C., Boin, A., & Keller, A. (2010). Managing Transboundary Crises: Identifying the Building Blocks of an Effective Response System. *Journal of Contingencies and Crisis Management*, 18(4), 195–207. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-5973.2010.00620.x>
- Arietti, R. A., & Freilich, J. D. (2024). Improving the Law Enforcement Response to Active Shooter Incidents: An Analysis of After-Action Reports. *Crime & Delinquency*, 0011128724127765. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0011128724127765>
- Boin, A., & McConnell, A. (2007). Preparing for Critical Infrastructure Breakdowns: The Limits of Crisis Management and the Need for Resilience. *Journal of Contingencies and Crisis Management*, 15(1), 50–59. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-5973.2007.00504.x>
- Boin, A., ‘T Hart, P., Stern, E., & Sundelius, B. (2016). *The Politics of Crisis Management: Public Leadership under Pressure* (2nd ed.). Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781316339756>
- Brown, O., Power, N., & Conchie, S. M. (2021). Communication and coordination across event phases: A multi-team system emergency response. *Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology*, 94(3), 591–615. <https://doi.org/10.1111/joop.12349>
- Buck, D. A., Trainor, J. E., & Aguirre, B. E. (2006). A Critical Evaluation of the Incident Command System and NIMS. *Journal of Homeland Security and Emergency Management*, 3(3). <https://doi.org/10.2202/1547-7355.1252>
- Committee on Increasing National Resilience to Hazards and Disasters & Committee on Science, Engineering, and Public Policy. (2012). *Disaster Resilience: A National Imperative* (p. 13457). Washington, D.C.: National Academies Press. <https://doi.org/10.17226/13457>
- Davidson, L., Carter, H., Drury, J., Amlôt, R., & Haslam, S. A. (2025). Exploring the relationship between shared identity and interoperability: A mixed methods analysis of discussion-based multi-agency emergency response exercises. *Policing and Society*, 35(1), 118–134. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10439463.2024.2374834>
- Hick, J. L., Hanfling, D., Evans, B., Greenberg, S., Alson, R., McKinney, S., & Minson, M. (2016). Health and Medical Response to Active Shooter and Bombing Events. *NAM Perspectives*, 6(6). <https://doi.org/10.31478/201606c>
- Jones, J., Kue, R., Mitchell, P., Eblan, Sgt. G., & Dyer, K. S. (2014). Emergency Medical Services Response to Active Shooter Incidents: Provider Comfort Level and Attitudes Before and After Participation in a Focused Response Training Program. *Prehospital and Disaster Medicine*, 29(4), 350–357. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1049023X14000648>
- Kapucu, N. (2006). Interagency Communication Networks During Emergencies: Boundary Spanners in Multiagency Coordination. *The American Review of Public Administration*, 36(2), 207–225. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0275074005280605>
- Longstaff, P. H., & Yang, S.-U. (2008). Communication Management and Trust: Their Role in Building Resilience to “Surprises” Such As Natural Disasters, Pandemic Flu, and Terrorism. *Ecology and Society*, 13(1), art3. <https://doi.org/10.5751/ES-02232-130103>
- Moynihan, D. P. (2008). Learning under Uncertainty: Networks in Crisis Management. *Public Administration Review*, 68(2), 350–365. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-6210.2007.00867.x>
- Power, N., Alcock, J., Philpot, R., & Levine, M. (2024). The psychology of interoperability: A systematic review of joint working between the UK emergency services. *Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology*, 97(1), 233–252. <https://doi.org/10.1111/joop.12469>
- Reynolds, B., & Seeger, M. W. (2005). Crisis and Emergency Risk Communication as an Integrative Model. *Journal of Health Communication*, 10(1), 43–55. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10810730590904571>
- Schorscher, N., Kippnich, M., Meybohm, P., & Wurmb, T. (2022). Lessons learned from terror attacks: Thematic priorities and development since 2001—results from a systematic review. *European Journal of Trauma and Emergency Surgery*, 48(4), 2613–2638. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s00068-021-01858-y>
- Steen-Tveit, K., & Erik Munkvold, B. (2021). From common operational picture to common situational understanding: An analysis based on practitioner perspectives. *Safety Science*, 142, 105381. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssci.2021.105381>

STRATEGIC LEADERSHIP AND CRISIS MANAGEMENT IN TERROR AND ACTIVE THREAT  
INCIDENTS: INTERAGENCY APPROACHES FOR RESILIENT PUBLIC SAFETY SYSTEMS

- Thompson, J., Rehn, M., Lossius, H. M., & Lockey, D. (2014). Risks to emergency medical responders at terrorist incidents: A narrative review of the medical literature. *Critical Care*, *18*(5), 521. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s13054-014-0521-1>
- Waugh, W. L., & Streib, G. (2006). Collaboration and Leadership for Effective Emergency Management. *Public Administration Review*, *66*(s1), 131–140. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-6210.2006.00673.x>