

Responding to institutional complexity: Reputation and crisis management in Danish municipalities

Finn Frandsen, Winni Johansen and Heidi Houlberg Salomonsen *

Finn Frandsen
Aarhus University,
ff@bcom.au.dk

Winni Johansen
Aarhus University,
wj@bcom.au.dk

Heidi Houlberg Salomonsen
Aalborg University,
heidi@dps.aau.dk

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Johansen, Heidi Houlberg
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Abstract

This article investigates how and provides tentative explanations of why reputation and crisis management—defined as two different yet not incompatible sets of ideas stemming from the same institutional logic—have been institutionalized in the public sector in Denmark. More specifically, we examine whether reputation and crisis management become integrated (coupling) or not (decoupling) as disciplines after having been introduced to the individual organizations. The empirical context is the organizational field of Danish municipalities. Based on both quantitative and qualitative data, including, an elite survey conducted among administrative actors from the municipalities and communication plans, the analysis found that although reputation and crisis management *per se* are widely disseminated within the field, they are neither entirely institutionalized nor strongly coupled.

Introduction

The fact that public organizations are confronted by complex environments generating conflicting expectations and demands is a long-accepted fact within the literature on public administration (Carpenter & Krause, 2012; Rainey & Chun, 2005) and organizational institutionalism (Christensen, Lægreid, Roness & Røvik, 2007). In the latter approach, such complexity has been identified as *institutional complexity*, which materializes as situations where organizations are

***Finn Frandsen** is a professor of corporate communication and director of the Centre for Corporate Communication in the School of Business and Social Sciences, Aarhus University, Denmark. His primary research interests include crisis management and crisis communication, environmental and climate communication, and the institutionalization of strategic communication in private and public organizations. His research has appeared in international journals and handbooks, such as *Corporate Communications: An International Journal*, *International Journal of Strategic Communication*, *Management Communication Quarterly*, *The Handbook of Crisis Communication* (2010), *Handbook of International Crisis Communication Research* (2015) and *Routledge Handbook of Strategic Communication* (2014).

Winni Johansen is a professor of corporate communication and director of the Executive Master's Program in Corporate Communication in the School of Business and Social Sciences, Aarhus University, Denmark. Her primary research interests include crisis management and crisis communication, environmental communication, change communication and the institutionalization of strategic communication in private and public organizations. Her research has appeared in international journals and handbooks, such as *Corporate Communications: An International Journal*, *International Journal of Strategic Communication*, *Management Communication Quarterly*, *Public Relations Review*, *The Handbook of Crisis Communication* (2010), *Routledge Handbook of Strategic Communication* (2014) and *Handbook of International Crisis Communication Research* (2015).

Heidi Houlberg Salomonsen is an associate professor of public organization and administration in the Department of Political Science at Aalborg University, Denmark. Her primary research interests are comparative research on the relationship between ministers, top civil servants and political advisers as well as strategic communication in the public sector, including reputation management, political communication etc., as well as case study methodology. Her research has appeared in international journals and books, such as *International Review of Administrative Sciences*, *International Journal of Public Administration*, *Scandinavian Journal of Public Administration*, *Journal of European Public Policy* and *Public Administration*.

confronted with incompatible prescriptions from multiple institutional logics (Greenwood et al., 2011).

A growing interest in institutional complexity has led to a substantial body of research on how organizations experience and respond to institutional complexity (for an overview, see Greenwood et al., 2011). However, the bulk of this research has been conducted as diachronic studies of how one dominant institutional logic is replaced by another over time. Synchronic studies of how organizations handle situations where the same institutional *logic* materializes as a number of different, yet not incompatible management *ideas* (Røvik, 2007), which organizations may institutionalize at one and the same time, are rare, albeit this is indeed often the situation confronting public managers today. This article aspires to fill this gap, investigating how two sets of new management ideas (reputation and crisis management) representing the same new institutional logic (the logic of the communicative organization and the symbolic ‘market-place’) become institutionalized in Danish municipalities.

The reputation of a public organization may be defined as “the set of beliefs about an organization’s capacities, intentions, history and mission that are embedded in a network of multiple audiences” (Carpenter, 2010a: 34; Carpenter & Krause, 2012: 26; for a criticism of Carpenter’s approach, see Maor, forthcoming). Inspired by Rindova and Martins’ (2012) multidimensional view of reputation, we see these beliefs as the outcome of the interpretation of information stemming from various sources located within the organizational field or in society at large, i.e. the public organizations themselves, their stakeholders, and institutional intermediaries such as the media and various ranking organizations, who’s positioning and portrayal of public organizations play a vital role for how they are perceived.

Existing within an environment characterized by the ubiquity of crisis, blame games and mediatization (Boin et al., 2005; Hood, 2002, 2011), the reputations of public organizations are constantly subjected to threats. Reputational threats may be defined as incidents that shed a negative light on an organization’s reputation, often transmitted as negative media coverage (Gilad et al., 2013; Maor & Sulitzeanu-Kenan, 2013), possibly resulting in a crisis for the organization (Coombs, 2015).

Responding to such threats, Danish municipalities have adopted reputational strategies (Salomonsen & Nielsen, forthcoming) and strategies aimed at managing and communicating during crisis (Frandsen & Johansen, 2009). However, whether this emerging awareness of reputational and crisis issues is institutionalized within the municipalities leading to a *coupling* of the ideas of reputation and crisis management or whether the two sets of ideas live their own autonomous lives *decoupled* from each other remains an unanswered question. Based upon an institutional perspective, this article aims to address this question¹.

In order to do so, we begin by reviewing the literature on reputation and crisis management, primarily in the Scandinavian context. We then briefly describe our theoretical framework, ending this section by posing a series of specific research questions. The research design and methods are introduced before the

empirical analysis is presented. The article concludes with a discussion of our findings.

Literature review

Although research on reputation and crisis management within the public sector is increasing, existing studies primarily investigate the two sets of management ideas separately.

Research in public sector reputation and reputation management in the Scandinavian countries includes both contributions aimed at contextualizing generic theories on reputation management in the context of the public sector as well as empirical investigations of reputation management within the health care sector (Blomgren, Hedmo & Waks, forthcoming; Byrkjeflot & Angell, 2008; Solbakk, 2011; Sataøen, 2011; Wæraas & Sataøen, 2013), central government organizations (Luoma-aho, 2007; Wæraas, 2013), courts of law (Moldenæs, 2011), and municipalities. Regarding the theoretical contributions, Byrkjeflot and Wæraas have published extensively on the challenges of practicing reputation management within the public sector due to the distinctiveness of the political management of public organizations, the normative context, and the traits characterizing many public organizations (Byrkjeflot, 2010; Wæraas & Byrkjeflot, 2012; Wæraas, Byrkjeflot & Angell, 2011; see also Wæraas & Maor, forthcoming).

Empirical investigations include the identification of a reputation paradox reflected as challenges for Norwegian municipalities when cultivating a unique reputation, thereby differentiating themselves from the organizational field of municipalities (Wæraas & Bjørnå, 2011). Somehow related, Wæraas (forthcoming) identifies the awareness of the existence of a reputation commons in Norwegian municipalities belonging to the same region. Contributions have also investigated the variety of stakeholders targeted in the reputation strategies of Norwegian municipalities and the strategic goals being pursued (Bjørnå, forthcoming). Concerning reputation strategies, Wæraas, Bjørnå and Moldenæs (2014) have identified the types of branding strategies used by Norwegian municipalities, discovering that most of them use an organizational strategy in favor of a place and democracy strategy.

While these contributions all share what Wæraas and Maor (forthcoming) identify as an organizational perspective on reputation, emphasizing “how public entities cope with the challenges of reputation and how they develop explicit strategies for doing it,” Salomonsen and Nielsen (forthcoming) have taken a political science perspective in their investigation of the politics of reputation management in Danish municipalities. Based upon a premise of public sector organizations being politically conscious organizations as well as arenas for political conflict and rivalry between politicians and between the politicians and the administration, however, they demonstrate that, in the municipal context, reputation management involves a low degree of conflict and disagreement between those actors despite both top civil servants and the mayor being involved

in such strategic management. Finally, Nielsen and Salomonsen (2012) have investigated the institutional pressures for performing strategic communication, including both reputation and crisis management in Danish municipalities.

Research in public sector crisis management in the Scandinavian countries has developed over time. Early research focused on emergency management with special reference to the role of the media and the communication strategies applied by the public authorities in disastrous situations. Recent research has a much broader approach, investigating, among other things, crisis communication to multicultural publics in cities (Falkheimer & Heide, 2006) and internal crisis communication in Danish municipalities (Johansen, Aggerholm & Frandsen, 2012) and Swedish hospitals (Heide & Simonsson, 2014) (for an overview of crisis research in Scandinavia, see Frandsen & Johansen, 2015).

In 2003, a Danish study of crisis preparedness revealed that public and private organizations perceive and practice crisis management differently (Frandsen & Johansen, 2004). The municipalities primarily perceived terrorism, bomb threats, accidents involving injuries and environmental pollution as threats, whereas private companies also included product recalls and negative media coverage. The municipalities perceived political problems and damages to their reputation among the general public to be the most important consequences of a crisis. In 2011, a similar study, including a stronger focus on internal crisis preparedness, revealed that the municipalities also have their own approach to internal crisis management, an approach distinctly different from that of private companies (Johansen, Aggerholm & Frandsen, 2012).

Concerning the relationship between reputation and crisis management, Frandsen and Johansen's (2009) explorative study of the institutionalization of crisis communication in Danish municipalities identified how two different institutional logics operate behind the municipal crisis preparedness systems: (1) a traditional *emergency management logic*, represented by the emergency officers, which focuses on citizen safety; and 2) a new *crisis management logic*, represented by the chief communication officers, which focuses on the reputation of the municipalities. At the time of the study, these two logics existed in 'separate worlds' with little interaction. Frandsen and Johansen (2013) turned the investigation of these two institutional logics into a more comprehensive study of the interaction between emergency management plans and crisis management plans in municipalities, discovering that the reputation concept has now also entered the vocabulary of the emergency management logic. Looking beyond the Scandinavian context, we find Maor and Sulitzeanu-Kenan's (2014) study of how an Australian service delivery agency's priority to crisis management (*vis-à-vis* output) when confronted by a crisis threatening its reputation is contingent upon its perception of past performance prior to the crisis.

Theoretical framework

In our efforts to describe and provide some tentative explanations concerning how and why Danish municipalities have institutionalized reputation and crisis

management as has been the case thus far, we have chosen to apply organizational institutionalism as our overall theoretical framework (Greenwood, Oliver, Sahlin & Suddaby, 2008). Essentially, neo-institutional theory is a theory about organizations, their environments, and how these environments in the shape of institutions penetrate, constrain and change the organizations (Scott, 2008).

Recently, there has been a growing interest among organizational scholars to study institutional complexity; that is, how organizations experience and respond to “incompatible prescriptions from multiple institutional logics” (Greenwood et al., 2011: 317). The institutional logics perspective has been instrumental in this development. In their landmark article, Friedland and Alford (1991) described society as an inter-institutional system in which each institution is associated with a specific institutional logic. Thus, society is constituted through a multitude of interdependent yet also contradictory logics. Thornton and Ocasio (2008) defined an institutional logic as the socially constructed, historical patterns of cultural symbols and material practices, including assumptions, values and beliefs, by which individuals and organizations provide meaning to their daily activities, organize time and space, and reproduce their lives and experiences.

In accordance with this perspective, we define the adoption of reputation and crisis management by Danish municipalities as a process of institutionalization, which, as becomes evident in the analysis below, starts in the mid-2000s. Similarly, we define the disciplines of reputation and crisis management as two sets of institutional ideas about how to manage, organize and communicate if an organization wants to establish and maintain a favorable reputation among its key stakeholders and/or handle a crisis.

Greenwood et al. (2011) describe the prototypical study of institutional complexity as that of how one dominant institutional logic is replaced by another during a period of transition. The two institutional logics are viewed as incompatible, and the shift from one logic to another eliminates the complexity generated within the organizations by this incompatibility. Finally, the prototypical study is mostly a horizontal field-level study leaving out the vertical nestedness of logics.

The present study differs from this description in two important ways: First, the institutional complexity under study is of a different kind. Reputation and crisis management represent two different sets of management ideas. However, the fact that they are different does not mean that they are also incompatible; on the contrary, we see them as belonging to one and the same institutional logic: the logic of the communicative organization and the symbolic ‘marketplace’. It is not a question of competing recipies; the two sets of ideas are members of the same family (Røvik, 1998). Second, we take a synchronic—not diachronic—perspective on the institutionalization of reputation and crisis management.

Our approach to institutional theory emerges from our understanding of organizational fields. To move away from an understanding of organizational fields as containers or static sets of boundaries, we adopt Wooten and Hoffman’s (2008, p. 138) definition of organizational fields as dynamic “*relational spaces* that provide an organization with the opportunity to involve itself with other

actors.” This new approach to organizational fields has numerous advantages. First, it is based on an idea of organizational fields as mechanisms for bringing about phenomena other than similarity (e.g., organizational identity). Second, it focuses on field-level processes that hold field members together, and not just on field-level outcomes. Finally, it also has a strong focus on the interactions between actors, and not just on diffusion.

We have found it necessary to expand the vocabulary of neo-institutional theory by adding a new distinction, namely that between external and internal decoupling. Whereas studies of decoupling traditionally address the question of the relation between formal structures and actual behavior (Meyer & Rowan, 1977) or talk and action (Brunsson, 2002)—that which we will refer to as *external* decoupling—we investigate the extent to which reputation and crisis strategies and concerns addressing the same potential challenge, that is reputational threats, but representing two different sets of ideas are coupled or subject to what we refer to as *internal* decoupling, which is institutionalized within the municipalities as two distinct strategies and aimed at different types of audiences.

The coupling or decoupling of ideas may be reflected in different institutional dimensions: formally in different types of plans and policies, normatively in organizational prescriptions of what is considered appropriate behavior, and cognitively in what is recognized as legitimate and taken for granted (Scott, 2008). To identify the degree of coupling *vis-à-vis* decoupling between reputation and crisis management in the different institutional dimensions, the article investigates a number of specific research questions.

One indication of a coupling of crisis and reputational concerns reflecting both a formal and potential cognitive institutional dimension is whether the reputational strategies reflect how the municipalities identify an intimate relation between crisis and reputation. Therefore, we ask:

- RQ(1): Is preparation for a potential crisis a central element in the municipal reputational strategies? And are reputational concerns a central element in their crisis communication strategies?

Due to the complexity of public organization environments, their reputation is based on the perceptions of multiple stakeholders (Carpenter, 2010b: 34, 58–59; Carpenter & Krause, 2012: 27–28), which for municipalities include the central government, the media, interest organizations, employees, citizens, other municipalities and so forth. The media in particular appears to play a crucial yet complicating role. They communicate their own opinions but also act as an institutional intermediary or stakeholder by proxy, serving as the channel through which multiple stakeholders can communicate about how they perceive an organization’s reputation (Boin et al., 2005: 72; Coombs, 2007: 164) as well as the media, from which many stakeholders gather the information upon which they

form their opinion of any given organization and its reputation. Some scholars even suggest a distinct “media reputation” for modern organizations (Deephouse, 2000). Hence, the media may be of paramount importance during a crisis, as argued by Coombs (2012): “When stakeholder process media reports and other information about a crisis, that crisis information becomes part of the indirect experience used to construct a corporate reputation” (p. 271). This leads us to ask:

- RQ(2): To what type of stakeholders do municipalities find it important to communicate as reflected in their reputation and/or crisis communication strategies? Is the media considered central?

In order to further investigate the degree of integration reflected in the institutionalization of reputation and crisis management, we ask:

- RQ(3): Do municipalities that find it important to prepare themselves for potential crises as part of their reputational strategies formulate explicit crisis communication plans more often than those that do not have crisis preparation as a central purpose?

This would reflect integration at the formal institutional level.

In a more normative vein, we also argue that the type of crisis management described in the strategies indicates the degree of normative and cognitive institutional dimensions of a coupling of reputational and crisis concerns. The performance of crisis management deeply depends on the perception of a crisis: (1) as an unpredictable negative event, which is to be accommodated by a reactive “damage control” type of management; or (2) as a dynamic process (including the phases before, during and after the crisis), which demands the continuous (re)assessments of the crisis and monitoring and dialogue with a variety of stakeholders. Furthermore, a dynamic—and hence proactive—approach acknowledges that indications *ex ante* the crisis are possible to detect and that learning *ex post* the crisis is as important as handling the crisis as it unfolds (Frandsen & Johansen, 2013: 172; Johansen & Frandsen, 2007: 109).

Another central characteristic of this process-oriented view is its strategic approach to crisis management, where the handling of a crisis is explicitly related to other important organizational goals and strategies, including the organizational reputation (Frandsen & Johansen, 2013: 172). The process orientation is further reflected in the development of *ex ante* risk assessments, stakeholder analyses, crisis communication strategies and plans for coordinating both responses and communication during and after a crisis. Based upon this distinction, we argue that a strategic, proactive and process-oriented approach to crisis management reflects an institutional integration and coupling of crisis and repu-

tational concerns in contrast to a more event-oriented approach. Therefore, we ask:

- RQ(4): Do municipalities have a process rather than an event-oriented approach to crises as reflected in their crisis communication plans?

Municipalities are multifunctional organizations (Frandsen & Johansen, 2009: 105) with multiple identities by default (Wæraas, 2008); hence, the general wisdom that public organizations have multiple reputations (Carpenter & Krause, 2012) is indeed the case for municipalities as well. The multifunctional and multiple identities of municipalities are reflected in the fact that they are local democracies governed by elected politicians. They are, however, also part of a multi-level public governance structure in which they are administrative and implementing bodies serving the central government. And, finally, they are “organizations” in an institutional sense. As such, municipalities have increasingly defined themselves as corporate organizations (Salomonsen, 2011) with “clearly defined boundaries and jurisdictions and organizational identities” (Wæraas, Bjørnå & Moldenæs, 2014). These multiple identities can be reflected within the multiple reputations of public organizations.

As argued by Carpenter and Krause (2012: 27), public organizations have multifaceted reputations, including (at least) four dimensions: (1) *performative*, the ability to execute its tasks competently and efficiently (Carpenter, 2010a: 46); (2) *moral*, the capacity to meet the normative expectations posed to public organizations, such as protecting citizens and ensuring transparency; (3) *technical*, which depends on the “expertise” and professional qualifications of the organization; and (4) *procedural*, which refers to the extent that the organizational performance conforms with set procedures and legislation (Carpenter, 2010a: 45–46). Related to the identity dimensions discussed above, municipalities as local democracies may be concerned about their moral reputation; municipalities as administrative bodies may be concerned about their procedural reputation; and municipalities as corporations may be concerned about their performative and technical reputation. In order to provide a first insight into the “type” of municipality that couples crisis and reputation management, we ask:

- RQ(5): In the municipalities in which preparing for potential crises is a central element in the reputational strategies, which type of identity and reputational dimension is central to the reputational strategies?

Research design and methods

The empirical analysis is based on a cross-sectional design, including quantitative survey data collected at a single point in time (Bryman, 2004: 41) combined with a more qualitative analysis of formal crisis communication strategies.

The survey data includes a survey sent to all of the *mayors* of the 98 Danish municipalities, all of the *chief administrative officers* (the municipal CAO being the highest appointed administrator), and the *persons responsible for strategic communication*. The questionnaire was submitted electronically using Survey Xact®. All of the target respondents received an email in which they were informed about the project together with a link to an online survey.

The complete details of the survey questions are available from the authors upon request. We used a 5-point Likert scale to reflect the respondent's level of agreement/disagreement with most of the questions. To promote the efficiency and ensure the construct validity of the questions (de Vaus, 2002: 96), communication managers from two municipalities tested the questionnaire and provided feedback regarding its content and structure before it was distributed.

The survey data was primarily collected from May to June, 2013. To increase the response rate, we emailed a number of reminders and eventually made telephone calls to the respondents in June 2013 and again in February and March 2014. We merged the three sets of answers to the questionnaires according to the following principle: If there was a person responsible for strategic communication, we included their answers; if not, we included the answer from the CAO; if neither of them had responded to the questionnaire, we included the mayor. Priority was given to the persons responsible for strategic communication (e.g. communication directors, communication consultants) due to the subject of our inquiry and the vital role these persons play in developing reputational and crisis communication strategies (Salomonsen and Nielsen, forthcoming). Overall, we reached an 79.6% response rate ($n = 79$, including 7 mayors, 18 CAOs and 53 persons responsible for strategic communication), although for some of the questions it falls to around 50%.

The survey data is analyzed as simple frequencies or correlations. Due to the ordinal character of the data, we have used a Gamma test for the latter (Hansen & Hansen, 2012: 380). The Gamma correlation coefficient can be used to interpret the strengths and direction of the relationship between two variables (Hansen and Hansen 2012: 380). The correlation coefficient has been interpreted as recommended by de Vaus (2002: 272).

The documents consist of crisis communication plans (in some cases included in a more general communication strategy) and emergency plans collected in April and May 2014. Most of the documents do not explicitly refer to policies, strategies or plans in their headings (13). If there was a reference in the title, however, plan (6) and policy (4) was the preferred choice. All of the 53 respondents who have stated that their municipality had a crisis communication plan were contacted by e-mail or telephone in order to collect the documents. We were able to establish contact to 36 of the 53 municipalities. From them, we received 23 crisis communication plans, four of which are a part of a more general communication strategy; the rest had no such plan after all or merely an emergency plan. The emergency plans are not included, as they are merely a legally required document, a plan that all municipalities must have (The Danish Emergency Act, §25, chapter 5). Hence, such plans are more about fulfilling

legal requirements than strategic reflections on how to manage and communicate during crisis.

The documents have primarily been subject to qualitative analysis. In order to identify the type of crisis management reflected in the communication plans, we used the codebook included in Appendix A. The coding is inspired by Johansen and Frandsen's (2007) definition of a strategic, proactive and process-oriented approach to crisis management together with their study of emergency management plans and crisis management plans (Frandsen & Johansen, 2013). The coding is performed in order to identify the degree to which the different dimensions of a process approach to crisis management are reflected in the strategies. As some of the municipalities requested anonymity, we have anonymized all of the quotes.

Findings

Various types of strategic communication have been a central concern for Danish municipalities at least since 2007, when extensive reform reduced the number of municipalities from 279 to 98. This is also reflected in Table 1, which shows that the number of municipalities that begin working strategically with their reputation increased radically around 2006–07.

Table 1. The year Danish municipalities began working strategically with their reputation

Year	Frequency	Valid %
2000 or before	7	
2002	1	
2005	1	
2006	7	
2007	14	
2008	7	
2009	4	
2010	5	
2011	6	
2012	6	
2013	1	
Total	59	100
Missing	29	
Total	98	

This tendency to devote attention to strategic reputation management has continued and, as reflected in Table 2, 87% of the municipalities included in the analysis are somehow working strategically with their reputation. Furthermore, as

reflected in Table 3, 79% state that they have a strategy for communication during crisis.

Table 2. Reputation strategies in Danish municipalities

	Frequency	Valid %
The municipality has a specific reputation strategy	19	28
The municipality has a reputation strategy as part of a general communication strategy	11	16
The municipality has no reputation strategy but it works strategically with its reputation anyway	29	43
The municipality has no reputation strategy	5	7
Others	4	6
Total	68	100
Missing	30	
Total	98	

Table 3. Crisis communication strategies in Danish municipalities

	Frequency	Valid %
The municipality has a specific crisis communication strategy	55	79
The municipality has no specific crisis communication strategy	15	21
Total	70	100
Missing	28	
Total	98	

A first indication of whether this substantial concern for strategic reputation management and the management of crisis communication is coupled in the respective strategies is illustrated in Tables 4 and 5.

Table 4. Central elements in the reputation strategies

	To a very high de- gree	To a high de- gree	To some degree	To a low de- gree	To a very low de- gree	Total	Miss -ing	Total
Increase the population	44* (58) **	21 (28)	9 (12)	2 (3)	0	76	22	98
Improve the reputation of the municipality held by important stakeholders	26 (35)	28 (37)	17 (23)	3 (4)	1 (1)	75	23	98
Improve the citizens identification with the municipality	25 (33)	23 (30)	24 (31)	5 (7)	0	77	21	98
Recruit the best employees	16 (21)	28 (36)	24 (31)	8 (10)	1 (1)	77	21	98
Improve the reputation of the municipality held by the employees	10 (13)	22 (29)	32 (42)	12 (16)	1 (1)	77	21	98
Prepare the municipality for potential crisis	7 (10)	14 (19)	24 (32)	20 (27)	9 (12)	74	24	98
Improve the citizens' trust in the local politicians	4 (5)	15 (20)	32 (43)	17 (23)	7 (9)	75	23	98
Insulate the municipality's autonomy from central government interference	4 (6)	10 (14)	22 (31)	17 (24)	18 (25)	71	27	98
Improve the citizens' trust in the public officials	2 (3)	11 (15)	30 (40)	22 (29)	11 (15)	76	22	98

* Number of respondents

** Valid percent

Table 5. Central elements in the crisis communication strategies

	To a very high degree	To a high degree	To some degree	To a low degree	To a very low degree	Total	Missing	Total
The Safety of the citizens	22* (44)**	14 (28)	9 (18)	3 (6)	2 (4)	50	48	98
The Municipality's Reputation	6 (12)	17 (34)	14 (28)	8 (16)	5 (10)	50	48	98

* Number of respondents

** Valid %

Table 4 reflects that preparing the municipalities for potential crises is not a central element in most municipal reputation strategies. Rather, according to the respondents, reputation management is a managerial instrument used for either increasing the population or developing more “traditional” purposes, such as “employer branding” and improving the reputation among central stakeholders. Furthermore, as reflected in Table 5, the crisis communication strategies are oriented more towards the safety of the citizens than the reputation of the municipality. The survey findings thus indicate that the strategies do not substantially reflect any formal and/or potential cognitive institutional integration and coupling of crisis and reputation strategies and concerns.

Regarding the type of stakeholders to whom the municipalities find it important to communicate in their reputation and crisis communication strategies, we expected the media to play a central role, both as a platform from which stakeholders perceive the information upon which they base their perceptions of the organization in “normal times” as well as during crises. However, although the media is considered an important stakeholder, citizens and the local business community are considered more important in relation to reputation strategies (Table 6), whereas the media and the citizens are considered almost equally important in relation to crisis communication strategies (Table 7) according to the survey respondents.

Table 6. Importance of stakeholders in reputation strategies

	To a very high degree	To a high de- gree	To some de- gree	To a low de- gree	To a very low de- gree	To- tal	Miss -ing	To -tal
The citi- zens	28* (47)**	18 (30)	13 (22)	1 (2)		60	38	98
The local business community	26 (43)	19 (32)	14 (23)	0	1 (2)	60	38	98
The media	19 (32)	24 (40)	11 (18)	2 (3)	4 (7)	60	38	98
Tourists	14 (23)	18 (30)	13 (22)	6 (10)	9 (15)	60	38	98
The em- ployees	9 (15)	14 (23)	27 (45)	8 (13)	2 (3)	60	38	98
Users of welfare services produced by the munici- pality	8 (13)	23 (38)	21 (35)	6 (10)	2 (3)	60	38	98
The par- liament	2 (3)	9 (15)	21 (35)	13 (22)	15 (25)	60	38	98
Other munici- palities	2 (3)	8 (13)	24 (40)	13 (22)	13 (22)	60	38	98
The politi- cal parties	2 (3)	5 (9)	14 (24)	20 (34)	18 (31)	59	39	98
Local Govern- ment Denmark (LGDK ²)	1 (2)	6 (10)	19 (32)	17 (29)	16 (27)	59	39	98

* Number of respondents

** Valid percent

Table 7. Importance of stakeholders in crisis communication strategies

	To a very high de- gree	To a high de- gree	To some de- gree	To a low de- gree	To a very low de- gree	Total	Miss- ing	Total
The citi- zens	18 (35)	29 (57)	3 (6)	0	1 (2)	51	47	98
The media	17 (33)	28 (55)	5 (10)	0	1 (2)	51	47	98
The politi- ti- cians	14 (28)	19 (37)	12 (24)	3 (6)	3 (6)	51	47	98

* Number of respondents

** Valid percent

Turning to the third research question, we find no relationship between whether the municipalities that find it important to prepare for potential crises as part of their reputational strategies and whether they have formulated a crisis communication strategy (table not shown). Hence, although the municipalities are aware of the importance of crisis management to reduce the reputational costs associated with such a crisis, they are not necessarily more inclined to develop a formal crisis communication plan.

The analysis of the type of crisis management reflected in the communication strategies reveals the degree to which we find a process-oriented management approach. This may be reflected both in terms of the degree to which the individual strategies, including the dimensions we suggested, reflect such a crisis management approach as well as the degree to which the individual dimensions are reflected across the strategies.

Turning to the former, Table 8 reflects the degree of process orientation of the individual strategies, calculated as the number of (the ten possible) dimensions of a process orientation in each individual strategy.

Table 8. Degree of process orientation of the crisis management as reflected in the individual crisis communication plans

Number of strategies including:	
1 dimension	1 (Municipality 18)
2 dimensions	5 (Municipality 1, 8, 9, 13, 17)
3 dimensions	7 (Municipality 2, 4, 7, 10, 20, 21, 22)
4 dimensions	1 (Municipality 14)
5 dimensions	7 (Municipality 3, 5, 11, 12, 15, 19, 23)
6 dimensions	2 (Municipality 6, 16)
7 dimensions	0
8 dimensions	0
9 dimensions	0
10 dimensions	0
Total	23

The analysis of the degree to which the individual dimensions are reflected across the strategies is presented in Table 9.

A first general finding reflected in Table 9 is that all of the aspects of a process orientation towards crisis management are represented to a moderate degree in the sample of plans. Dimensions reflecting a strategic approach, recognition of phases in the crisis process, recognition of the dynamic character of a crisis, and the perception of crisis as either likely or predictable, are reflected in the plans.

Whereas descriptions of a temporary crisis staff function (dimension 4) are part of almost all of the plans, this is only the case for around one third of the municipalities with respect to the recognition of the importance of evaluation and learning after a crisis (dimension 6), the importance of stakeholder analysis (dimension 3), specific crisis communication strategies (dimension 5) and the importance of monitoring during a crisis (dimension 7). Regarding important stakeholders, as reflected in the survey, the media and citizens are the stakeholders mentioned most frequently in the strategies. The special role played by the media is reflected in the quotes below.

Municipality X is of interest for the environment and mentioned in many media. In practice, the role of the press is often to control how the municipality acts as a public authority and the standards of the services produced by the municipality. From time to time, critical events or negative stories will occur. It is important that they are dealt with quickly and in an effective manner towards the press (p. 2). Municipality 15

Table 9. Degree to which the individual dimensions of a process approach to crisis management is reflected in the crisis communication strategies

Type of dimension		Number of strategies including this dimension
Dimensions reflecting a strategic approach	1. The strategy is explicitly related to other municipal strategies, goals and/or visions	13 (Municipality 1, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 12, 13, 15, 16, 19, 20)
Recognition of phases in the process of a crisis	2. The strategy includes a risk assessment	4 (Municipality 6, 10, 15, 23)
	3. The strategy includes a stakeholder analysis	8 (Municipality 5, 6, 10, 11, 12, 15, 17, 23)
	4. The strategy includes description of a crisis staff, coordination of who should be involved how, and reflections on communication	21 (Municipality 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21, 23)
	5. The strategy includes a specific crisis communication strategy	8 (Municipality 2: 6, 9, 11, 12, 14, 16, 19)
	6. The strategy includes reflections on the importance of evaluation and learning after the crisis	10 (Municipality 3, 5, 6, 14, 15, 16, 19, 21, 22, 23)
	Recognition of the dynamic character of crisis	7. The strategy recognizes that monitoring during a crisis is important
8. The strategy recognizes the importance of dialogue with multiple stakeholders		1 (Municipality 22)
9. The strategy describes a portfolio of scenarios		2 (Municipality 11, 16)
Perception of crisis	10 Perception of crisis to be likely/predictable	9 (Municipality 3, 11, 14, 15, 16, 19, 20, 22, 23)

The press and media are important to us. This is where much of the day-to-day dialogue with the citizens, the business community and other stakeholders is performed. At the same time, the press contributes to linking the image of Municipality X to the environment. The

media affects how we as employees perceive our organization and how the citizens and the business community perceive the municipality (p. 2). Municipality 19

The quote below shows that monitoring during the crisis largely means monitoring the media.

The crisis communication team monitors the media during the crisis. The team informs the chairman for the coordinating steering committee or the crisis management informed about the current media situation (p. 5). Municipality 12

The fact that crises are likely and predictable is a part of nine of the strategies. Qualitative examples of this dimension are reflected in Table 10.

Table 10. Qualitative examples of descriptions of crises as likely and predictable in crisis communication plans

Can crisis be predicted? Crisis can occur in two ways: the sudden and the smoldering crises. The sudden crisis arises without a warning and will usually generate substantial media coverage. This type of crisis can't be planned and always occurs inconveniently, e.g. Friday afternoon, when you're off for the holidays. Conversely, the smoldering crisis sneaks up on you and has been growing for a while before breaking out. They are often serious problems, which have either been overlooked (ignored) or to which nobody has paid any attention. If—or when—the problem captures the attention of the public, it will often cause negative press coverage, and the solution to the problem can involve large, non-budgeted expenses (p. 3). M 2

This handbook sharpens our attention regarding critical issues, signals and good crisis management (p. 2). M11

Nobody knows for sure when difficult situations and crises arise. But they rarely come as a surprise. It is often possible to predict most of the difficult situations (p. 5). M 14

Municipality X is of interest for the environment and is mentioned in many media. In practice, the role of the press is often to control how the municipality acts as a public authority and the standards of the services produced by the municipality. From time to time, critical events or negative stories will occur. It is important that they are dealt with quickly and in an effective manner towards the press (p. 2). M 15

Like all other municipalities, Municipality X occasionally experiences issues/cases that are subject to negative media coverage and threaten the reputation or values of the municipality (p. 1). M16

Municipality X is a large corporation with a diverse portfolio. Therefore, it happens that we make mistakes or unexpected crises and accidents occur that affect the employees, the citizens or in some other ways are of public interest (p. 9). M 19

'The best way to manage a crisis is to prevent it' (Coombs, 1999:7)...Like issues that have become a crisis, it's important to pay attention to a potential crisis; that is, problems that have not yet become known to the public but which may quickly develop into a crisis (p. 6). M 20

Crises are unavoidable...crises can often be predicted—pay attention to the signals (p. 1). M 22

A media crisis is an unexpected situation which threatens an organization's reputation, image or legitimacy fundamentally (p. 6). M 23

Regarding the dimension reflecting how the strategy is explicitly related to other municipal strategies, goals or visions (dimension 1 in Table 9), we find that of the thirteen strategies, only seven explicitly refer to the reputational aspects of the municipality, eleven explicitly refer to reputation as a central concern and reason for engaging in crisis communication. Table 11 provides the qualitative descriptions of reputational concerns in the 11 municipalities.

Table 11. Qualitative examples of reputational concerns in crisis communication strategies

In this context, a crisis is defined as an important issue capable of endangering the reputation and credibility of Municipality X. That is, a reputational crisis, a media crisis or a communication crisis (p. 9). M 1

A crisis is a serious event affecting human safety, the environment, products, services, and/or the reputation of the municipality and a disruption of (parts of) the municipality's operation. And which therefore has or may risk receiving intensive media coverage (p. 3). M 3

We define a crisis as a serious event that affects the citizen safety and the environment, production, services and/or reputation of the municipality (p. 3). M 4

A crisis is an unexpected event or issue that threatens the expectations stakeholders have to the organization or which may have serious consequences for the organization's self-perception/performance and generate negative coverage (p. 1). M 5

A crisis is a sudden event or situation that develops quickly, demands immediate reaction, generates stress and insecurity, and threatens the reputation of the municipality, its relations, operation or—in the worst case—its citizens (p. 2). M 6

A crisis can be defined as an unexpected, unpredictable event, which may have a negative effect on the organization of the municipality and its reputation in relation to different stakeholders (e.g. politicians, employees, citizens, media) *if it is handled incorrectly* [italics in the original] (p. 2). M 7

Crisis communication is relevant, when an unforeseen event or issue, which expectedly will attract a significant political or media attention, threatens the business or the image of the municipality (p.6). M 8

A crisis is an unexpected situation that fundamentally threatens the municipality's reputation, image and legitimacy. The crisis unfolds in the media when an issue is mentioned repeatedly. Criticism in the media is not necessarily a crisis, but poorly handled criticism can become a crisis. Source: KL's Kriseguide 2008 (p. 2). M 15

Like all other municipalities, Municipality X occasionally experiences issues/cases that are subject to negative media coverage and threaten the reputation or values of the municipality (p. 1). M 16

...a crisis is an unexpected situation, which threatens the citizens, the municipal employees or the reputation, image and legitimacy of the municipality in a fundamental way (p. 9). M19

A media crisis is an unexpected situation that fundamentally threatens an organization's reputation, image or legitimacy (p. 6). M 20

Further indication of the reputational concerns reflected within the crisis communication plans are reflected by the fact that 14 municipalities provide examples of crises in their plans. Nine of them mention reputational crisis and/or negative media coverage as examples. Summing up: around half of the crisis communication plans explicitly refer to crisis as having a reputational dimension; and in most of the qualitative descriptions presented in Table 11, crises are

largely defined as threats to reputation and legitimacy. More than is the case for the reputational strategies, we find a coupling of reputation and crisis concerns in the crisis communication plans, which reflects a formal—and to some extent cognitive—institutionalized awareness of the intimate relationship between reputation and crisis.

The final research questions asked: In the municipalities where preparation for a potential crisis is a central element in the reputational strategy, what type of identity and reputational dimension is central to the reputational strategy? Based on gamma tests, we find a positive and moderate-to-substantial relationship between preparing the municipalities for potential crises and 1) improving the reputation of the municipality held by important stakeholders in the municipality (Gamma = 0.353; $p < 0.01$); 2) improving the reputation of the municipality held by the employees (Gamma = 0.501; $p < 0.01$ ³); 3) recruiting the best employees (Gamma = 0.328; $p < 0.01$); and 4) improving the citizens' identification with the municipality (Gamma = 0.409; $p < 0.01$) (tables not shown).⁴ These relationships suggest a moderate-to-strong relationship between preparing the municipalities for potential crises and elements reflecting generic elements of reputational management relevant for both private and public organizations, namely targeting reputational efforts to important stakeholders as well as a tool for ensuring the recruitment of the best employees. These elements reflect performative and technical reputational dimensions, which we have argued are affiliated with a corporate identity.

Furthermore, we find positive and very strong relationships between preparing the municipalities for potential crises and 1) improving citizen trust in the local politicians (Gamma = 0.614; $p < 0.01$); 2) improving the citizen trust in the civil servants in the local administration (Gamma = 0.645; $p < 0.01$), and 3) insulating the autonomy of the municipality from central government interference (Gamma = 0.582; $p < 0.01$) (tables not shown). These findings suggest that a very strong relationship exists between preparing the municipalities for potential crises and elements reflecting elements specific to public sector organizations, namely, ensuring trust in order to be able to act as a legitimate political actor and ensuring autonomy in order to safeguard the local democracy. Such elements reflect a moral reputational dimension, which we have argued is of vital importance for the local democracy aspect of the municipalities' multiple-identity profiles.

Discussion and conclusion

Framed in an institutional perspective, this article has investigated a process of complex institutionalization. This ambition has been addressed as an investigation of whether the emerging awareness of reputation and crisis concerns within the organizational field of Danish municipalities leads to a coupling or decoupling between reputation and crisis management within the municipal organizations. Based upon the analysis of a number of more operational research questions, however, the conclusion is rather ambiguous.

Examining the crisis communication strategies and analyzing the survey answers regarding crisis and reputation management by the persons responsible for strategic communication and the CAOs, we conclude that the normative ideas regarding the strategic management of reputation and crisis have been institutionalized in most Danish municipalities. Hence, a first conclusion is that reputation and crisis management *per se* have been disseminated widely among the Danish municipalities. The qualitative analysis reveals that reputational ideas are an aspect of crisis management (for a similar conclusion, see Frandsen & Johansen, 2009: 113) and *vice versa*. However, the degree to which crisis is a central element of reputational strategies and reputation to crisis ditto is relatively low. Furthermore, in the municipalities that recognize preparing for crisis to be a central element of reputational strategic management, this is not significantly related to the formulation of crisis communication plans.

The qualitative analysis of the crisis plans reveals a somewhat stronger degree of coupling between reputational aspects with the crisis management. Although the plans only to a moderate degree reflect a proactive and process approach to crisis management, an awareness of the reputational implications of such crisis is evident in most crisis communication plans. Furthermore, almost half of the municipalities included in the analysis of the plans recognize that crises are likely, which may be a first (both cognitive and strategic) step towards a more process-oriented approach to crisis management and, hence, a more appropriate approach for limiting reputational costs and damages before, during and after a crisis.

How might we explain this relatively modest degree of coupling between two managerial practices, which represent the same logic and, hence, may be neither incompatible nor contradictory? One tentative explanation may be found in the field of Danish municipalities, which may be characterized not only as a very mature field, but also as a field or “relational space,” which is held together by field-level processes generated by LGDK. While merely representing a normative authority capable of generating normative and mimetic institutional pressures upon the municipalities, their “enforcement mechanisms” (Greenwood et al., 2011: 339) are rather dominant and powerful within the field of Danish municipalities. This is also the case for disseminating the ideas of performing reputational and crisis management where LGDK generates normative pressures for engaging in such strategic communicative endeavors (Frandsen & Johansen, 2013; Nielsen & Salomonsen, 2012). This is reflected by the relatively dominant perception of a crisis being a “media crisis” (e.g., also the dominant role the media plays in crisis communication strategies) and, as noted by Frandsen and Johansen (2009) in their analysis of the institutionalization of a crisis *vis-à-vis* an emergency logic in Danish municipalities, in how the strategies reflect that the definition of crisis prevalent in the field is largely inspired by LGDK’s perception of a crisis (Frandsen & Johansen, 2013: 183-184). In such a perspective, the institutionalization of crisis and reputation management reflects the institutional adoption—or institutional “acquiescence” (Pache & Santos, 2010: 462)—and compliance to two normative institutional ideas largely generated by LGDK

rather than potential strategic and reflexive responses to perceived challenges and/or changes in the environments of the Danish municipalities.

Another tentative explanation of the relatively modest integration may be time, as both crisis and reputation management—although widely diffused—represent rather new managerial practices within the Danish municipalities.

Although modestly coupled, the analysis reveals that crisis and reputation management *per se* is widely disseminated among the municipalities. In addition to the normative enforcement generated by LGDK, a number of other contextual factors possibly add to the explanation. First, the radical reform reducing the number of municipalities generated attention concerning municipal identity and reputation as well as the potential “crisis” and substantial (negative) reactions from the environments involved in large mergers and other types of changes (Frandsen & Johansen, 2009: 102; Nielsen & Salomonsen, 2012: 58-60). Furthermore, contemporary society is generally more occupied with risks and crises.

Although modest, the coupling indicates that the normative ideas represented by reputation and crisis management can potentially grow stronger coupled rather than internally decoupled within the Danish municipalities. This may be further supported by the fact, that although representing different ideas, reputational and crisis management are expectedly “represented” and “given voice” (Greenwood et al., 2011: 348; Pache & Santos, 2010: 460-461) by the same type of actors within the municipalities, namely the apex of the administrative bureaucracy and those responsible for and working professionally with strategic communication. Hence, although neither entirely institutionalized nor strongly coupled within the field of Danish municipalities, we expect that reputational and crisis management concerns may live less separate lives in the future.

From a theoretical perspective, the ideas behind reputation and crisis management are in fact intimately related and deserve close integration. Increasingly integrating reputation concerns and crisis management is therefore vital, as crises pose severe threats to the organizational reputation. “A crisis poses a threat to reputational assets [...] As greater emphasis is placed on reputation, a corresponding emphasis must be placed on crisis management as a means of protecting reputational assets” (Coombs, 2015: 13). Further research has documented how crisis response strategies are “likely” to have an affect on the reputation of the organization after a crisis (Coombs, 2012: 273).

Reputational concerns have been a central element in crisis communication research since its infancy (Coombs, 2012: 263). First, crisis response strategies have been seen as tools for protecting or repairing corporate reputations, as such strategies aim at affecting the perception of the organizational stakeholders (Benoit, 1995). Second, the Situational Crisis Communication Theory developed by Coombs points out the importance of an organization’s prior reputation for the “symbolic costs” of a crisis (Coombs, 2012: 269). That is, previously having a negative reputation may influence the degree to which stakeholders ascribe responsibility for a crisis to an organization. Based on the crisis management literature, we may therefore argue that coupling reputation and crisis management is crucial—and from a strategic point of view preferable—for municipalities.

The theoretical arguments for the importance of integrating and coupling concerns of relevance to reputation and crisis management can, however, not only be based on the perspective of the individual municipalities and the costs involved in reputational damages, but can also be based on the perspective from the field of municipalities. As argued by Wæraas (forthcoming), municipalities are placed within a “reputational commons” when sharing the reputation ascribed to the entire municipal sector (Barnett, 2006; King, Lenox & Barnett, 2002; Barnett & King, 2008). Hence, the “symbolic costs” of a crisis in one municipality may also “rub off” on municipalities in general.

Furthermore, the conclusion can be contextualized within the research on reputation management in the public sector. According to Wæraas and Maor (forthcoming), this research has been conducted from two different perspectives—political science and organization theory—the focus being on two rather different rationales for the strategic reputational efforts of public organizations. Based on agencies primarily found in central government, the political science perspective emphasizes how a favorable reputation possibly serves as a political asset for public organizations inasmuch as it can be used to ensure public support as well as “achieve delegated autonomy and discretion from politicians” (Carpenter, 2002: 491), insulating the organization from “political attacks” from their political principals. From this perspective, reputational concerns are based on agencies that are seen as rational political actors.

Research from the organizational perspective is primarily based on the local levels of the public sector. Here, there is a tendency to emphasize how a favorable reputation in municipalities, the health sector, etc. may increase the population (more taxpaying citizens), aid the recruitment of the best employees, and attract business investors (Byrkjeflot, Salomonsen & Wæraas, 2013: 149-150; Luoma-aho, 2007: 124). This perspective is based on the idea that public organizations increasingly identify themselves as an *organization* in search of a stronger reputation and applying reputation management as a universal “organizational recipe” ready to be implemented in any context (Wæraas & Byrkjeflot, 2012). From this perspective, the idea of the public organization as an organization has become an institution *per se* (Røvik, 2007: 66), and behavior within such organizations is seen as resulting from a process of institutionalization rather than rational calculations on how to maximize bureaucratic discretion and autonomy. From this perspective, our study contributes to the organizational perspective on public sector reputation, which has thus far emphasized the *symbolic* management of reputation (Wæraas & Maor, forthcoming), as it goes beyond the symbolic management of reputational aspects. In line with this ambition, we have demonstrated how central municipal actors prioritize different elements when describing their reputational managerial practices. We have also investigated the degree to which the formal strategic documents reflect any indication of a cognitive awareness of the need to integrate the strategic efforts of reputation and crisis management. By investigating strategies, however, one might argue that we are indeed engaged in the analysis of the symbolic aspects of the Danish municipalities. Although acknowledging this, we also point out the importance

of not merely emphasizing a decoupling between the “substantial” and “symbolic” aspects of organizational behavior (Wæraas, Byrkjeflot & Angell, 2011), since intended ceremonial practices may, over time, “take over” the organization (Greenwood et al., 2011: 350) after a certain “incubation” time, as suggested by Røvik (2007: 361). Further, the formulation of a strategy or vision for handling crises (as reputational threats) is critical for ensuring the coordination and coupling between e.g. reputational and crisis concerns within the municipal organization (Maor 2010: 966). Hence, although strategies indeed primarily reflect “organizational talk,” such talk is to be considered as “action taken within the social order of an organization” (Czarniawska-Joerges & Joerges, 1988: 173), representing a linking mechanism between the symbolic aspects of an organization and organizational practices (Czarniawska-Joerges & Joerges, 1988: 173). We therefore argue that the management of the symbolic aspects of an organization may be as much about managing the organizational reality as being about the symbolic management of environmental relations and reputational dimensions.

A central limitation of the analysis relates to the data. Although the data include both formal documents and survey data as well as quantitative and qualitative analyses, the data is largely reflecting the perception of crisis and reputational management from the top of the administrative hierarchy and/or the core staff regarding strategic communication. This produces limitations regarding the external validity (generalizability) to other levels of the municipal organization, as the actors included in this analysis are more likely to be more “receptive” to the institutional pressure (Delmas & Toffel, 2008: 1032) for engaging in this type of strategic management as well as being more aware of their potentially intimate relation.

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Appendix A:

Codebook for identifying the degree to which the strategies reflect a process-based approach to crisis management:

1: What is the name of the municipality?	
2: Is the crisis communication strategy	
1) part of a general communication strategy?	
2) a specific strategy for crisis communication?	
3: Which types of crisis are described?	
4: Dimensions in a process approach to crisis management	
4.1 Strategic approach	1 The strategy is explicitly related to other strategies, goals or visions of the municipality - if yes, which (e.g. democracy, reputation, emergency plan)
4.2. Recognition of phases in the process	The strategy includes: 2 A risk assessment - <i>a priori</i> - described as a vital instrument during a crisis 3 A stake holder analysis - <i>a priori</i> , and if so internal stakeholders external stakeholders both internal and external stakeholders - described as vital instrument during a crisis 4 Crisis plan including description of a CMT, coordination of who should be involved and how, and some reflections on communication 5 A specific crisis communication plan - internal - external - internal and external 6 Reflections on the importance of evaluation and learning after the crisis
4.3. Recognition of the dynamic character of crises	7 Monitoring during crises is important 8 Dialogue with multiple stakeholders is important 9 Portfolio of scenarios - types of scenarios (e.g. internally or externally generated crisis)
4.4 Crises are perceived as:	10 Crises are perceived as likely/predictable
5. Which stakeholders are mentioned?	

Notes

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² LGDK is the interest organization of Danish local governments. Membership of LGDK is voluntary, but it is presently organizing all 98 local governments. LGDK annually negotiates the overall financial frames of the local governments with the Danish Government. Furthermore, LGDK actively ‘assists’ the local governments to accommodate the different types of challenges posed both to the local politicians and the local administration, including the CEO when implementing the policies decided by the national government as well as introducing new management ideas to local governments. As LGDK membership is strictly voluntary for the local governments, LGDK has no authority over local governments and cannot force them to do anything. However, LGDK can apply normative pressure upon local governments.

³ Improving the reputation of the municipality held by the employees is just above 0.50 meaning that it is not only moderate to substantial, but substantial.

⁴ There is no significant relation between preparing the municipalities for potential crises and increasing the population of the municipality as central elements of the reputational strategy.