The Chief of Staff

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About The Typeface

The Chief of Staff is typeset in Financier Display 24 for headings, Untitled Serif 12-15 for sub headings, Untitled Sans 10 for base text and the footnotes are set in Untitled Sans 8.

Financier Display

Financier Display is a serif typeface designed by Kris Sowersby of Klim Type Foundry. It was created for the redesign of the Financial Times in 2014 and later released as a retail font in 2016. Financier Display is available in six weights with matching italics as well as a corresponding text family.

United Serif and Untitled Sans

Untitled Sans and Untitled Serif are quotidian typefaces. Untitled Sans is a plain, neogrotesk sans validated by the ideas of Jasper Morrison and Naoto Fukasawa's Super Normal project.

Untitled Serif is drawn from the old-style of typefaces: the post-Caslon, pre-Times workhorses offered by almost every metal type foundry of the time. Untitled Sans and Untitled Serif are related neither by skeleton nor a traditional aesthetic connection, but by concept only. They have a deliberate aesthetic of not being designed by anyone in particular.

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The Chief of Staff Association

Chiefs of staff have uneven access to the global bodies of knowledge that exist within and about the profession. Without a central information repository, there is no structure to guide the evolutionary process and continued growth of the field of study. To rectify this, The Chief of Staff Association, together with leading academics and practitioners, offer The Chief of Staff journal; a platform which elevates the voices, insights, and experiences of those in an intrinsically humble occupation.

The Chief of Staff acts as a clearinghouse for data, knowledge, skills and ideas on one of the world's most important but understudied professions. In doing so, we equip chiefs of staff with the tools necessary to expand their knowledge and increase their effectiveness. We provide current and future generations of chiefs with the requisite medium to inspire opportunity and promote the growth and admiration of the role. The journal addresses practical, theoretical and historical aspects of the profession, guiding the analysis of historical decisions and inspiring future leaders. As such, we are interested in submissions that present both contemporary ideas and classic insights.

The Chief of Staff Association (CSA) is the international professional body for chiefs of staff in leading corporations, governments, the military and diplomatic corps. Our members have an impact when and where it matters through facilitated connections, curated forums and professional certification. The purpose of The Chief of Staff Association is to advance the influence of professional chiefs of staff and recognise the role of chiefs as connectors of global leaders.

Three pillars underpin The Chief of Staff Association. Education, Network, Advocacy.

Education

The Chief of Staff Association offers a formal path to certification and ongoing professional development in two complementary streams. Achieve industry-recognised credentials, work with global thought leaders, and elevate your career with education designed for the contemporary chief of staff.

Network

The CSA convenes the world's most influential chiefs of staff from leading private corporations, governments, not-for-profits and the military to advance connections and create the ideal conditions in which influential, long-term authentic relationships can be formed.

Advocacy

The CSA promotes understanding and awareness of the chief of staff profession through world-first market research, tailored resources, and an industry journal that shapes professional discourse and builds recognition for the role.

Structure

Incorporated in the State of Delaware in the United States of America, The Chief of Staff Association is chartered as a public benefit corporation. A public benefit corporation is a private company that produces public benefits and operates responsibly and sustainably.

Editorial Board

Caroline Scotter Mainprize

BA (Hons)

Caroline is a writer, editor, and communications advisor, working mostly for organisations involved in research and education. Clients have included Oxford University Press, Saïd Business School, Bayes Business School, and the international development and publishing organisation CABI. She has edited a number of books, annual reports, and journals, and written practitioner-focused research reports, including Oxford’s The Museum Leaders Report and Understanding Chief Digital Officers.Before freelancing she was responsible for the corporate communications at Oxford University Press. She had previously worked for a London PR consultancy and as a journalist on a business newspaper.

Dr Chris Howard

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Dr Chris Howard is the executive vice president and chief operating officer of the ASU Public Enterprise. Howard works closely with President Crow and the other executive vice presidents to coordinate enterprise-wide initiatives and advancement, oversee ASU Enterprise affiliates, advance new enterprise relationships and opportunities, and integrate ASU Enterprise planning and strategy. As a Rhodes Scholar, he earned a doctorate in politics (D.Phil.) from the University of Oxford. He also has an M.B.A. with distinction from Harvard Business School. Dr. Howard earned a Bronze Star for service in Afghanistan, and also served with the elite Joint Special Operations Command and as the Reserve Air Attaché to Liberia.

Dr Carolyn Kissane

Ph D (Columbia)

Dr Carolyn Kissane serves as the Academic Director of the graduate program in Global Affairs at the Center for Global Affairs at New York University. Dr Kissane is a Clinical Professor where she teaches graduate level courses examining the geopolitics of energy, comparative energy politics, energy, environment and resource security. She serves as the Academic Director for the MS in Global Affairs and the new MS in Global Security, Conflict, and Cybercrime.

Editorial Board

Board of Governance

Trent Smyth AM

Director & Chief Executive Officer

Trent served as the Honorary Consul for Malawi for nine years and the Secretary of the Consular Corps Melbourne between 2014-2021. Trent is the founder of the Sports Diplomacy Foundation and a former Director of the Australian Grand Prix Corporation and holds a Bachelor of Commerce and an MBA from the University of Melbourne. In 2021, Mr Smyth was awarded an Order of Australia for services to international relations, motorsport and business.

Santiago Perez Teuffer

Director

Santiago's strong Latin-American network and diverse business experience between Latin America and the US, provide a valuable edge for him to serve on the Board of the CSA. Santiago has an extensive banking career, and after pursuing his graduate studies at Stanford, went back to Mexico to pursue an entrepreneurial career in the energy industry. Santiago has an MS in Energy from the Stanford School of Energy, and an MBA from the Stanford GSB.

Board of Governance

Dr Aron D'Souza
Director

Dr Aron D'Souza has had a career across diplomacy, academia, finance and law. He served as the Honorary Consul of the Republic of Moldova in Australia until 2019. Aron was educated at Harris Manchester College in the University of Oxford, where he read law, and also holds a PhD in intellectual property law from the University of Melbourne. Together with the Foundation for Young Australians, Aron founded the Nexus Australian Youth Summit, a branch of a global movement of young philanthropists and impact investors convened by the United Nations.

Sabrina Roshan
Director

Sabrina Roshan is the Director of the Schmidt Futures Associate Product Manager (APM) program, where she oversees the strategic and operational direction of the team. Prior to Schmidt Futures, she served as the Chief Strategy Officer for Good Machine, a venture studio that ideates impactful innovations and establishes companies to address a wide range of socio-ecological problems. Sabrina also oversaw expansion strategy and public-private partnerships at Andela. Andela specialises in helping highly-skilled, global technology talent in emerging markets connect with leading companies. Sabrina spent several years at the World Bank, where she served at the Board of Directors, supporting the US Executive Director during the Obama administration.

Executive Education at the University of Oxford

The Chief of Staff Association has worked with Saïd Business School at Oxford University to create the Oxford Chief of Staff Executive Education Programme. The programme is available only to Members and Fellows and is conducted in-person and at Oxford University over the course of four days.

In addition to the academic syllabus, the programme features insights from invited political, diplomatic and business leaders. These speakers share views on the core competencies of the role and understand emerging challenges. Delegates participate in shared discussion and debate, enriching their perspectives and capability.

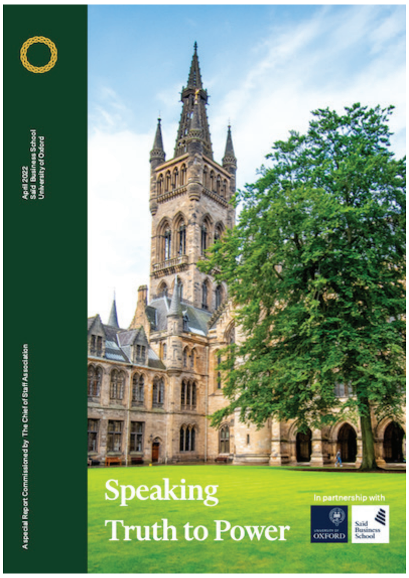
Participants are encouraged – formally and informally – to share best practice and learnings gained in their careers and current roles. At the end of the programme, students not only form strong friendships but also gain a network of competent peers who can act as ongoing sources of advice and professional support.

"Speaking Truth to Power" Oxford Programme Report

Our programme reports harness the collective expertise of the chief of staff community, establishing global best-practices that advance the role.

The Oxford programme report captures a flavour of the discussions held during the programme and highlights the key insights that emerged.

Together, the reports serve as a valuable resource for chiefs of staff worldwide; allowing them to track developments in the profession and stay-up-to-date with contemporary discourse related to the role.



Membership of The Chief of Staff Association

The CSA is a community of peers who together build strength, confidence and resilience: extraordinary people achieving extraordinary outcomes.

Levels of Membership

Associate

Learn from your peers. Grow your confidence and your international network. Commence a rewarding, future career as a chief of staff.

The CSA Associate Membership program reflects The Chief of Staff Association's determination to build a global community of highly skilled, experienced, and connected chiefs of staff at different stages of their careers. The programme has been designed to support the personal growth and professional development of the next generation of chiefs of staff.

Our Core Competency series introduces Associate members to the key skills required to succeed as contemporary chiefs of staff. Associate membership also grants access to valuable Co-Elevation Forums and The Leadership series – a rich source of insights from the world's preeminent chiefs of staff and principals.

Associates receive a subscription to The Chief of Staff journal, a distinctive Fattorini lapel pin and individualised calling cards.

Member

Membership is your passport to connect with and learn from chiefs of staff who are committed to their craft. Our team provide advice and introductions, confidentially and efficiently, when it counts.

The Chief of Staff Association has designed a comprehensive education platform that offers a path to certification and ongoing professional development in two complementary streams.

Certified Chief of Staff™ & Master Chief of Staff™ Programme:

Enhance your expertise with a structured curriculum that positions you at the forefront of the profession. Members who complete the programme receive recognition as a Certified Chief of Staff™ and Master Chief of Staff™.

The Professional Development Programme:

In the professional development programme, members gain expert insights and personal guidance from the world's preeminent chiefs of staff and principals that they can immediately implement in their organisation.

Members receive subscriptions to The Chief of Staff journal, individualised calling cards, and the highly regarded CSA post-nominal.

“Every extra-ordinary business is built on the foundation of very-ordinary operations done excellently; the chief of staff role is often pivotal in giving leverage to leaders to make that a reality”

Jonathan (‘JB’) Bullock, Google’s First Chief of Staff

Letter from the Chief Editor

Caroline Scotter Mainprize,
Chief Editor, The *Chief of Staff*

The boundary-spanning nature of their role puts chiefs of staff right at the centre of two common organisational challenges: managing change and responding to crises.

They may be superficially quite different. Change programmes are usually initiated by the organisation, though often in response to new drivers in the external environment; they are typically long-term and based on a formal process or structure. Crises, in contrast, are almost always reactive and by definition unplanned—although that does not mean that they are impossible to prepare for.

However, they are linked by the need for cross-divisional or cross-departmental working; they both exist outside the normal hierarchy and 'business as usual' of the organisation. And both have high potential for conflict. In this issue we offer a range of different perspectives on change and crisis management.

Our foreword is by Capricia Penavic Marshall, Chief of Protocol of the United States, 2009–2013, who sets the scene by describing the delicate structures which minimise the potential for conflict in diplomatic engagements.

There are theoretical approaches from Patrick Dawson, Professor of Change, Innovation and Creativity at the University of Adelaide and Emeritus Professor at the University of Aberdeen, and Mareike Helmts, Chief of Staff of private equity investor Mutares Consulting and a Senior Manager in the Transformation Management Office. Patrick introduces a processual framework for change, based on the understanding that time has a subjective element that shapes behavioural responses to contextual and internally driven change. Mareike Helmts uses a case study of a business turnaround to suggest how rapid restructuring can be achieved in the face of complex, time-pressured, and unpredictable circumstances.

As ever, CSA members bring their professional experiences and reflections to bear on the Journal's theme. Guillaume Leuenberger, currently serving in the NATO Rapid Reaction Corps Headquarters, gives us a historical perspective on military crisis management, brought up to date by Massimo Zaccheroni, Chief of Staff Executive Assistant to NATO's Allied Joint Force Command in Naples, who draws on the NATO response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine to suggest some of the most important skills that a chief of staff needs in the face of a military crisis.

Chris Keely, Chief Operating Officer, Deputy Executive Director, and Acting Director of Contact Tracing for NYC Test & Trace Corps, and his chief of staff Sarah Liston discuss their involvement in New York City's response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

We profile Joe Sciortino, chief of staff to the Regional Director of FEMA Region 2, who, since cutting his teeth on Hurricane Sandy, and more recently Hurricane Maria, has spent a decade in the world of crisis and emergency management. Our other profile looks at change on a personal level, as Matthew Geleta discusses why he moved from management consultancy with Bain to become chief of staff at a funeral services startup. Meanwhile, from the wider CSA community, PR expert Maurizio Maione explains how a new approach to data can help improve organisations' communications response to crises.

Finally, eagle-eyed readers will have noticed that this volume of The Chief of Staff marks its own change, as Katherine Firth steps down as Chief Editor after a year and hands over to Caroline Scotter Mainprize, who brings with her extensive professional experience as an editor and writer.

Katherine writes, 'Looking back over the last year, I am delighted to see the journal continues to represent the best of the Association and the profession: thoughtful reflections from chiefs of staff; recognition from senior leaders; and researchers bringing their expertise to illuminate common challenges chiefs of staff face. The diversity of the profession has remained front and center: experienced and newer chiefs of staff, from across the globe, in a wide range of industries. The new special issue editions have prompted fascinating, insightful and sometimes unexpected contributions, and we are already making plans for further future special issues into 2023.

'As I shift from being actively involved in sourcing, coaching, developing and editing pieces for publication, I will most miss the conversations with our contributors. Those meetings where we discussed ideas, explored the story and angle, and workshopped how to make the article the best it could be, were a chance to work directly with the members of the Chief of Staff Association. I look forward to continuing to hear from members and other contributors, if now more as a reader.'

Setting the Scene for International Diplomacy: A Foreword by Capricia Marshall

Capricia Penavic Marshall
Former White House Chief of Protocol (2009 to 2013),
Founder, Global Engagement Strategies

Despite their apparent ease and fluidity, international diplomatic engagements are set within a delicate framework. Carefully crafted and managed by the chief of protocol and their team, these engagements are guided by the goals of parity and collaboration.

Chiefs of protocol are akin to chiefs of staff: they serve their principal loyally, leading their team to achieve the goals set by their government, organisation, or business. Whether it is taking the temperature of the moment, clearing the path of any potholes their principal may encounter, or instinctively advising on critical last-minute changes, chiefs of protocol must be prepared for any scenario. They are the eyes and ears for their principal. They collect all relevant information and communicate the unfiltered reality of a situation, while simultaneously suggesting how to navigate it.

As Chief of Protocol, I depended on a professional team of talented individuals. I sought to knit the team together by equipping them with precise logistics, a motivating spirit, and a heartfelt dedication to service. I endeavoured to instil in them the subtle arts of applying the long-standing, transnational rules and traditions of foreign policy, and build relationships along the way. My team conducted their duties like swans on a lake, gliding with purposeful elegance while paddling like mad below. They were prepared for every unexpected moment, while skillfully engaging in the nuances of diplomacy. They never failed to do just that.

I had the honour of working with dedicated public servants, who laboured tirelessly to seek out the best solutions for their country, while remaining empathetic to the concerns and interests of those facing them across the bilateral table. Before opening a door or shaking a hand, they were confident that I had created an environment in which they could successfully conduct negotiations to achieve our US foreign policy objectives. Serving my country in this extraordinary post will forever be the highlight of my career.

I greatly admire those who have served in these positions of leadership, whether as chief of protocol or chief of staff. From their perch the policies are made, the growth of the organisation takes place, the successes of the principal are achieved, and mentorship is possible. Thank you, CSA, for creating this platform from which we can share our best practices, learn from talented individuals, and celebrate those making a tremendous difference.

When Step-by-Step Doesn't Work: Towards a Processual Model of Change

Dr Patrick Dawson
Emeritus Professor, University of Aberdeen

Patrick Dawson argues that misunderstanding the nature of time and change can cause major issues, and lead to costly mistakes. Realising that change is a complex process can help us to navigate it more effectively.

Our existence in the world and our experiences in life are forever changing. We continuously engage with ongoing processes that are complex and which entangle and interconnect. The place of structures and routines is evident in the development of societies that create socio-economic political systems, institutions, laws, regulations, as is their use of coordinated universal time to synchronise clocks in the control and coordination of global markets and international activities. These organising forms provide a sense of stability that often masks the continuous nature of change.

Many popular change management frameworks take on assumptions of fixity and promote linear perspectives that offer simple sequential step models to successful change. These generally prescribe the need to follow a set sequence of events that occur along a fixed pathway that aligns with a set timeframe. There is an assumption that change is something that we can control through detailed planning and that it minimises the chance of disturbance to the achievement of a future desired state. However, these simple representational frameworks misconceive the nature of change and ignore some fundamental issues that require attention.

The fallacies of change and the inadequacies of linear step frameworks

Change management centres on the design and implementation of a change initiative that takes a company from a current position to a new desired way of operating. However, this process is not as simple as may first appear, with unforeseen events and unexpected contingencies, as well as people and the contextual dynamics of changing environments, all influencing planned change initiatives. Even with careful planning, things rarely go as expected, and compound when certain assumptions dominate simple and unrealistic plans for change.

I outline below eight inadequacies that require careful consideration before embarking on a change initiative.

1. **Changing:** Change is not something that we impose on a stable society. Rather new initiatives, when implemented, engage with ongoing dynamic processes. Our institutions are in turn not stable entities but fluid organisations that operate within these changing contextual environments. Change initiatives occur in changing not static contexts.

2. **Implementation:** The notion of a pre-set sequence of steps assumes comprehensive knowledge of all future contingencies and ignores the importance of adaptation to the unexpected. As Robert Burns wrote, even the best laid schemes go askew and leave nothing but grief and pain. Consequently, an open mind rather than a fixed stance is required in being able to revise and reconsider implementation strategies in the face of unforeseen contingencies.

3. **Design and content:** Flexibility Is not only important during implementation but also for the design and content stages of the change initiative. There is often an assumption that the material characteristics of a change programme are unchangeable, that the core elements of the initiative ought to be unassailable. However, modification and reconfiguration during uptake and use can be key components for effective change.

4. **Power and politics:** People often contest the imposition of change, questioning whether change is for the betterment of all. Conventional frameworks generally underplay political dimensions, yet power and politics come to the fore as individuals and groups position themselves in seeking to secure vested interests or minimise loss. Change is a politicised process, and change agents unable to steer these processes through this political terrain are unlikely to be successful.

5. **Resistance:** The assumption that resistance to change is a natural human response can blinker attention to problems and issues that those on the receiving end of change may identify. Those that contest change are not simply obstacles to overcome but are a potential source of knowledge and insight into issues not previously considered.

6. **Stories and sense making:** Dominant models downplay or ignore the importance of stories among individuals and groups. Such stories are particularly prevalent during the implementation of new initiatives and are critical to the processes of sense making. They enable people to make sense of and give sense to the changes they experience and act as a springboard for action as well as influencing the nature and extent of conflict or consent to change.

7. **Inevitable progress and stories of success:** Change is often associated with progress, as something good to pursue, especially in the competitive world of business. This may limit debate and criticism in the political context of organisations, where individuals are seeking to promote their own careers. The results of detrimental change are very evident in the world. However, people often ignore the insights and lessons from failure in focusing on the key ingredients of successful change. These stories of successful change

often overstate elements such as charismatic leadership and wash over the difficulties and pitfalls that arise. They provide a good read and PR story but are not a good knowledge source for understanding the practice of managing change.

8. **Time is clock time:** The clock and the calendar are often assumed to be time. This objective, standardised notion of time supports coordination in the implementation of schedules in managing change, yet it ignores the subjective experience of time and the importance of temporality. Subjective time is equally important in the stories we relay in making sense of the world around us and in the different ways in which we experience time and draw on the past and the future in understanding the present (temporality). It is important not to ignore individual and group interpretations of the past as well as expectations of the future, as these all shape behavioural responses to unfolding changes in the present.

A processual framework for understanding change

The processual framework I propose attempts to take the inadequacies of linear step models into account. It draws on over 40 years of experience in studying processes of change in organisations through longitudinal research methods involving extended periods observing and interviewing people at all levels. Examining change as it happens and unfolds in practice—rather than snapshot after-the-event studies—is central to this approach. The stories, explanations and reflections of senior managers, the accounts of 'war stories', achievements and tribulations of middle managers and change agents, and the views, concerns and tales of employees and their representatives, all inform the processual framework.

What is 'processual'? 'Processual' is a term I use to capture the complex, non-linear, dynamic processes of change. A central assumption is that new change initiatives always arise within the context of multiple, ongoing change processes; they are never isolated or discrete events. Our starting point centres on improving our knowledge and understanding of how to steer and, when necessary, reshape change. This can inform the design of initiatives that move with, rather than against, the complex currents associated with changing organisations. From this perspective, formalised change programmes change organisations, but in unforeseen, as well as foreseen, ways. In part this is due to the ongoing contextual processes of change that interweave with and influence these processes. In short, change initiatives shape organisations, and changing organisations shape change initiatives.

The notion of non-linearity that the processual frame refers to accommodates regression as well as the multiple and competing histories that arise during processes of change. There is a non-linearity in the way people revise, modify, replace and reappraise activities and tasks in moving forward by going back. For example, in reconsidering the content and direction of change programmes, there is non-linearity in the different ways that people draw on their historical experiences and future expectations in explaining their own change encounters within the development of both collective and individual sense making. In this, the framework engages with the importance of dialogue and stories, the power-political nature of change, and the complex non-linear dynamic processes of change.

The framework highlights the need to respond to unforeseen events; identifies the potential for proactive decision-making on circumventing emerging barriers through gaining the support of significant stakeholders; and appreciates the paradox and ambiguities of steering processes towards a future that remains ultimately unknowable.

The dynamic, complex, ongoing processes of changing is what constitutes a processual approach, and comprises three main elements that are not discrete but overlap and interweave.

1. Careful consideration of the change initiative in question, taking into account the type, scale and scope of the proposed change and its key defining characteristics.
2. The temporal context that includes wider changes in the global economy and contextual elements that pertain to organising processes and the history and culture of organisations.
3. The power-political processes that come into play before, during and after a planned programme of change.

I now explain each of these in a little more detail.

Change initiatives

Change initiatives come in many shapes and sizes. At one end of the spectrum these include small projects such as proactive improvements through incremental adjustments and the fine-tuning of operations in response to other needs and changes. These smaller scale initiatives typically work within the domain of the known, and often form an integral part of in-house monitoring and evaluation activities. At the other end of the spectrum lie the more radical transformational change initiatives that are generally large-scale and strategic in nature. A company may radically rethink their core activities, markets and purpose. The change may be proactive and involve considerable planning and adjustment over a number of years, or it may be in response to an unexpected turn in global events or a sudden shift in business market activities. The growth, development and innovation in the creative, telecommunications and computer industries over the past two decades provide us with a number of examples of radical change.

At the outset of such initiatives, it is important to clarify the defining characteristics of a change. To monitor and evaluate modifications that arise during design and implementation is equally important. Labels can sometimes misdirect attention or lead to false assumptions about what these key characteristics are. For example, in an extensive study into the uptake and use of Total Quality Management (TQM) in Australian organisations, we found that programmes operating under the same label exhibited very different characteristics; we also found that the content of these change initiatives altered over time (Dawson and Palmer, 1995). Being aware of the defining characteristics of change and of any modifications or adaptations that occur over time is important for two main reasons. First, to ensure that there is a common awareness and agreement on the objectives and content of change. Second, to facilitate meaningful dialogue in managing the uptake and implementation of change.

Temporal context

The second element that requires careful consideration is temporal context. This refers to the context in which changes are happening as well as the influence of these contextual dynamics on changing organisations. There are the local contextual dynamics rooted in everyday workplace activities as well as the more global concerns that would include broader economic, socio-political and environmental issues. Shifts in these contextual conditions can stimulate a business response to change. For example, a major upturn in financial markets, a significant fall in commodity prices, a pandemic, or a global act of terrorism can all generate responses for change as business leaders, entrepreneurs, and managers seek to capture new markets, remain competitive or simply ensure future survival. These changing dynamic contexts shape strategic decision-making and local processes of sense making in influencing the way people view the world, and make and give sense to their own lives.

The processual approach highlights how business organisations are not static but dynamic entities.

They search for strategic opportunities that service prospective ambitions and goals. Established organisations are also cultural, with a history of relations between individuals and groups that influence processes of change. These cultures evolve over time and whilst continually changing also establish a normative binding that is shared by groups often holding together potentially diverse members. Shared values and beliefs are evident in differing group identities and the various sub-cultures that comprise organisations (Dawson and Bloor, 1994). At the surface level, espoused values are often evident in the physical artefact's and symbols of organisations, such as buildings, décor or logos associated with, for example, corporate identity design. However, below these surface representations of culture lie the deeper, more basic assumptions, which arise and influence the dynamics of group behaviour (Schein, 2017). Differing work groups establish their own set of values and norms (often linked with their identity in being, for example, a miner, dentist or pilot) that allow members to understand the types of behaviours expected of them in different situations.

Culture arises in an historical context through the sharing of values and beliefs. It draws on the temporal context, often repositioning multiple pasts, and projecting into possible futures in shaping attitudes and perceptions. In the meaning-making that occurs, especially among established sub-cultural groupings, a sense of the past often reaffirms identity-relevant beliefs and shapes collective processes of sense making. These processes of sense making are central to change and refer to the social process of making sense and giving meaning to the experiences of change.

People talk about their change encounters through gossip and stories that seek to give and make sense of what is going on and what is likely to happen in the future (Fan and Dawson, 2022). These multiple stories of change co-exist in organisations, and people continually revise and elaborate in their attempts to explain, persuade, educate, convince and shape the speed and direction of change. There is a temporal context that comprises a past (retrospective stories), a present (stories about what is happening now) and a future (prospective stories). These elements are rarely discrete but interweave stories: stories in the here-and-now; but also drawing on, and perhaps reinterpreting, the past to account for ongoing experiences;

whilst also projecting forward to future possible outcomes (Dawson and McLean, 2013).

These stories help people share and co-construct collective interpretations of change. They are of great significance as they can provide platforms for resistance in blocking and derailing change. Stories may also allay fears and concerns; engage people in the change project; or simply provide some form of continuity between what is happening, what happened in the past and what is likely to happen in the future. Although there will always be different perspectives and stories around change initiatives, the efficacy of stories in being able to influence views and attitudes in shaping change should never be underestimated.

Power-political processes

Stories are also part of the power-political processes much in evidence during times of change. Change agents with particular vested interests may seek to steer decisions through, for example, the use of socio-cultural sources of power to influence key stakeholders: through playing an active role in agenda setting, in controlling the parameters of decision-making, or in using formal authority structures to limit engagement in change decisions. The capacity to secure important strategic alliances, to gain governmental support, to shape stakeholder and competitor discussions or to use wealth and resources to sway the opinions of others, are all part of these power-political processes.

At a more visible political level, we may observe these processes in the formal discussions of change agreements, and in the negotiation and consultation processes that surround planning and implementing change. Managing and responding to conflicts or resistance among employees, between various groups or occupations, between union and management or during strategic deliberations, are all examples of processes that are affected by power and politics. There may also be external agencies that come into play, due to governmental pressure, competitor alliances or the influence of overseas divisions of large corporations.
The political activity and power plays of different groups all shape and reshape processes of change: designated leaders, change agents, consultants working within the organisation, and various organisational groups, as well as between and within managerial, supervisory and operative personnel. The covert, as well as more overt, power-political processes steer decision-making and the setting of agendas at critical junctures during the process of organisational change.

Leaders and change agents are central characters in these political processes of change. Effective leadership centres on the ability to influence individuals and groups towards the achievement of objectives. It involves the use of power and political skill, an understanding of people, and an ability to inspire and engage others. Typically, leading change involves a range of people and approaches in the need to adapt and change over time, to meet the different contextual requirements and changing expectations and needs of all those involved in these processes.

There may be a ‘change champion’, but to facilitate change you need a range of staff; and in large-scale change, there is usually a dispersal of change-agency roles. Change agents need political skills, especially during highly contested radical change initiatives, where they need to win people over, deal with opponents, and build support for an initiative. Politically skilled change agents need to be able to build networks, be creative, have good diagnostic capabilities, and understand the sources and bases of power—as well as the uses of power in routine practice and how power becomes embedded in organisational structures and systems; for example, in the use of authority and reporting relationships where forms of expert, legitimate, reward and coercive power can all come into play.

However, it is important to remember that unlike hierarchical authority structures, power is multi-directional. Stories, as part of this power-political process, can bolster resistance as well as facilitating acceptance in making and giving sense to disruptions, uncertainties, threats, opportunities and ambiguities.

Practical insights on change management

There is no absence of guidelines for managing change, and yet effective management of large-scale initiatives is uncommon. One central problem with many of these approaches is the tendency to view change as a discrete phenomenon that moves through a series of linear steps. This is not the case.

Change is messy, non-linear, political and complex, occurring in a dynamic context where other changes are also occurring.

In managing these processes, we need to be aware of the processual and ongoing nature of change. Organisations are continually changing: they are not static entities. There is a need for contextual awareness, a deep understanding of the proposed change, political skills and astuteness as well as an open mind in being flexible and able to adapt to unforeseen problems and unexpected issues that will arise. In moving away from a universal set of prescriptions, as every change is different, we can nevertheless present six general rules of thumb that need consideration in managing change initiatives.

Accept that it will take time

There is no quick fix to managing change; it takes time, and requires planning and flexibility. Managing change involves considerable work in planning and evaluating proposed change trajectories, including being adaptable to the numerous revisions and modifications that may be necessary as change unfolds. The generation of commitment and support requires time as well as the utilisation of an array of skills and competencies in the continual adaptation to changing contextual circumstances. It is complex, demanding and difficult. There will be downsides, and as such, a line of continual improvement is unlikely.

Managing change involves orchestrating interweaving processes—that may contradict as well as compliment—towards a set of objectives, which may themselves refine and change over time. These processes have an ongoing history that is never static but open to change as the past is fluid in the context of the present and in the light of future expectations. Once again, this draws attention to the significance of temporality and the value of a processual approach in understanding the theory and practice of change.

Learn from all experiences and do not simply focus on post-hoc rationalisations

It is important to learn from all experiences (the good, the bad and the ugly) and not simply to focus attention on so-called ‘success’ stories or the views of those in dominant positions. Such stories are often post-hoc rationalised accounts constructed to convey a certain preferred message to an intended audience. As such, the experiences and views of different groups and individuals at various levels within an organisation are all potential sources of knowledge for understanding and shaping processes of change. It is also important to remember that we often learn more from failure—which may also be something that we do not want to openly talk about—than the reconstructed (selective and partisan) stories of success.

Remember that communication is more than just communication

Communication is central to managing change, promoting creativity and supporting the innovation process, but it also needs to be contextual. As supported by much of the literature, employee communication should be ongoing and consistent. It is important to be aware of competing narratives that co-exist at any given time, and these can undermine and misdirect attention and create environments of mistrust and uncertainty. When misinformation arises through gossip and rumour it is essential that countermeasures reaffirm intentions and intended outcomes. The choice of what, when, and how to communicate is vital. Communication is crucial for employees at all levels and is a central resource for those seeking to steer processes in certain preferred directions and for those wishing to resist the intentions of others.

Align training, education, and staff development with the practical needs of new operating philosophies and working procedures

It is important to train employees in new techniques and procedures and for that training to be delivered when needed and as required. Change agents must ensure that there is no misalignment of training programmes with initiatives that seek to develop new skills as this can be a major source of employee scepticism and frustration.

Exercise political skills

Political sensitivity and astuteness in an ability to manoeuvre through shifting terrains is a critical skill for change agents. They need to communicate well in enabling continual engagement with employees and the different concerns of groups and influential stakeholders. Individual and group experience will vary in context and over time and alas there are no silver bullets that exist to guarantee success.

Do not expect a universal prescription

Simple solutions to complex problems do not exist.
There are no simple recipes to competitive success.

This is a central point yet one that people commonly ignore. In dealing with difficult and complex issues, people naturally look for the easy way out. Given this tendency to simplify, we should at a minimum challenge—where possible and practicable—the assumptions behind linear sequential packages and simple recipes for company success.

Significant change takes time, is complex and requires politically astute and knowledgeable change agents to steer change processes and engage with those on the receiving end of change. It is about the content of the change initiative, the context within which change is taking place, the responses of employees and the stories and sense making that occurs. All these are central to the capacity and skills of change agents to achieve effective change outcomes.

Conclusion

Change management is central to organisations and never more so than in the world that we currently live in. With issues of climate change, the need for sustainable business practices, ethical considerations, advances in technology, the dynamics of global competition, world pandemics and political turbulence, there is a need to be creative in adapting to new and shifting environments in markets and the workplace. Whilst there remains a tendency to view change as a linear series of events that runs through a number of identifiable and predictable stages, in practice, change is a complex dynamic process that often occurs within a multiple-change rather than a single-change environment.

The need to adapt and reconfigure ways of working and to be creative and innovative in the face of new challenges and emerging opportunities, all highlight the need for skill, competence and understanding in managing these complex processes. Managing change is as much about navigating uncharted seas in dealing with the unexpected as it is about managing planned initiatives. Planning is essential but it is only the beginning. The plan acts as a potential pathway that needs close monitoring as organisations will need to adapt and be flexible in the face of unforeseen issues and problems.

As I consistently stress, even with the best-laid plans things will go awry. As such, managing change is difficult, complex and messy. In tackling these complex issues, I promote the processual perspective I describe in this article that goes beyond a simple recipe approach in accommodating the broader temporal and contextual dynamics of changing. It broadens awareness of the issues and problems that are likely to arise and, although it does not offer any universal solutions, it draws attention to the need to continually monitor, evaluate, and adjust to the dynamic processes of changing. It also identifies key areas of concern for change agents and offers insight into the potential pitfalls of linear approaches.

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Strategic Change and Organisational Restructuring

Mareike Helmts
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Mareike Helmts explains why a chief of staff is a critical player in successful business turnarounds

Distressed companies face complex, time-pressured, and unpredictable circumstances, often caused by already critical or worsening liquidity, deteriorating business performance—in revenue and/or EBITDA(earnings before interest, tax, depreciation, and amortization)—or unfavourable organisational challenges such as talent loss. To stop the negative spiral of a distressed business, active, hands-on and rapid restructuring is necessary to reposition the company and to place it on a sustainable growth and profitability path again.

This demands radical change that starts with a credible business plan. Although such business plans are usually prepared with thoroughness, and contain a great amount of detail, academic research shows that roughly 70% of all restructuring programmes fail. (Bucy, 2016). At the heart of most failures is not the substance and credibility of the business plan itself, but the people who need to engage, connect with each other, commit, and deliver the desired results.

The most common reasons for failure? 'Management behaviour that does not support the change' (ibid) and 'employee resistance to change' (ibid). Failures are often characterised by a lack of urgency, hesitation due to fear of change, and lack of clarity about the company's vision and mission—all factors that are linked to the psychology of the individual or team. In this situation, a chief of staff (CoS) can play a crucial role by aligning communication, perspectives, and priorities across the organisation.

Strengthening and empowering a chief of staff in situations dealing with severe issues can help to make internal change efforts more efficient, effective, and enduring.

Based on real-life case examples, this article presents five different areas where a chief of staff has been the key to successful restructuring.

Looping in constructive feedback to enforce incentives

An infrastructure company was struggling with continued loss of market share and low-to-negative overall profitability in a highly competitive and saturated market in Sweden. The challenge was to motivate more than 180 blue- and white-collar employees to focus on profitability first, i.e. by saving costs independently and standardising processes.

Although the CEO had crafted a change narrative to connect the newly established vision to the required operational changes, not all people in the organisation instantly ‘bought in’. In fact, there were several pockets of active resistance. An incentive programme tailored to the employees’ needs was required. However, the implementation first stagnated with no measurable KPIs (key performance indicators) for the company’s success in line with the vision and strategy being available.

By connecting with people throughout the organisation and digging deep into the challenges and opportunities of day-to-day operations of each employee, the chief of staff was able to introduce KPIs which served as a basis for a possible incentive system. This pragmatic approach included measuring machine utilisation with a weekly diary, addressing health and safety issues, and including regular quality control measures, checking whether all required steps had been completed. This framework was augmented by opportunities for employees to provide feedback, including, for example, hints on machines being unused, people missing their monthly operating tasks required by customers, or accidents happening regularly.

Because the chief of staff was so well connected with people at all levels in the organisation, the feedback was effectively communicated and changes were implemented. The KPIs and constant feedback loops formed the basis of an incentive programme that reinforced a drive for improvement at an individual level.

Within a few months of implementing the system, profits at each site increased significantly and were up 70% in all forecasts compared to the starting point. Within the first year, the solution led to the implementation of more than 200 individual initiatives, helping to more than double profitability.

Accelerating the decision-making process

Since restructuring activities very often involve a variety of time-sensitive activities such as liquidity management or organisational changes, the chief of staff can add significant value by creating direct links between the company’s employees and the upper management. This can bypass cumbersome hierarchical protocols and reduce the time taken to complete tasks. The special role of an empowered chief of staff can motivate employees to speak their minds freely and to communicate their thoughts on what is really hindering organisational performance. The chief of staff as a communication channel fosters more direct and immediate connections, allowing employees to ‘unbureaucratically’ share important information and find answers without having to access senior management. This way they get help and advice from a person they deeply trust.

In the infrastructure company example, a best-practice sharing session was introduced by the chief of staff to connect relevant parties quickly, facilitate continuous improvement, and ensure that change became part of daily business operations. This offered a platform for regular idea exchanges without the pressure of successful restructuring from the board level.
For example, one middle manager presented how he bundled the demand for direct materials, reducing costs by approximately 30%. After sharing the initiative, several managers adopted the approach and saved cash for the company quickly. Before the start of the turnaround

programme, managers tended to work in silos, not exchanging ideas and approaches but prioritising their own departments. The chief of staff's role in bridging organisational divides was key to unleashing organisational agility, collaboration, and effectiveness.

Bringing vision and mission to life

Restructuring inevitably requires the establishment of some form of new strategy connected to the transformation agenda. But only 40% of companies overcome the hurdles to develop a truly integrated strategy (Gassmann, 2022): a clear vision supported by a set of strategic imperatives and quantified business outcomes linking restructuring to sustainability. A strong vision, or sense of purpose, energises and aligns the business.

The strategy must be translated into concrete actions embedded in an actionable business plan that considers use cases and technological, human, and organisational capabilities. This is where a chief of staff can play a key role in reinforcing strategic alignment.

Restructuring situations create plenty of uncertainties in an organisation facing financial distress. Employees tend to respond to uncertainty either by 'keeping their heads down' and focusing on tasks (perhaps also looking for opportunities in other companies), or by constantly questioning their own roles and the future of the team. This is not ideal: we know that employees perform best when they have a clearly defined professional development and career path in mind, and are able to evaluate the value of their contributions both to the firm and their career.

The chief of staff can excite team members about the work they do and improve their understanding of the company's targets. By splitting the vision into simple tasks and aligning the contributions of individuals, the chief of staff can ensure that the vision is tethered to their impact and their purpose on the team.

In the Swedish company case, the chief of staff acted as a role model to bring the management board's vision—to be 'first in mind'—to the company. The vision statement was not only included in all the meetings between the management board and the employees, but was also addressed in several smaller meetings to make sure everyone understood the underlying messages, mission statements, and individual tasks. By showing the employees real-life examples of how they could make a better profit through changing business routines, such as buying a washing machine instead of using laundry services, bundling material orders, or planning the work in a more structured way, the vision was hardwired into everyone's mind through concrete examples. Each employee now plays a part in bringing the vision of being 'first in mind' to life, especially visible through the introduction of a LinkedIn hashtag that is now widely and proudly used by all employees.

Building empathy, community, and shared purpose

The economic impact of COVID-19 and the Ukraine crisis has forced many companies to adapt to the 'new normal' with new value-creation processes.

For the CEO, this can mean making tough decisions, such as firing employees or imposing strict targets. Rigorous adherence to such a strategy minimises the potential risk exposure to market uncertainties. But it can also give the affected employees the impression that the employer, personified by the CEO and senior management, is cold-hearted and uncaring, rather than simply securing the resilience of the company as a whole.

The work climate before, during, and after restructuring is a clear indicator of morale and how employees have responded to the handling and communication of the process. This, in turn, may impact engagement and productivity, positively or negatively, leaving an indelible impression on the company's employment brand. Since the CEO must act rationally, the chief of staff can be more visibly empathetic and caring.

In the example of the Swedish infrastructure company, the need for change motivated the entire staff to contribute more work hours than ever before. While spending a few extra minutes each week checking in with team members and gauging how they were handling their workload, the chief of staff received more and more reports of people finding it difficult to separate their work and home lives. Working to understand the unique needs and goals of each team member helped deal with this problem of overwork. While the CEO focused on the top-of-mind issues, the chief of staff helped stabilise the corporate culture and build empathy and purpose.

Effective monitoring of progress toward defined outcomes

Evaluation of developed business plans is a critical activity for the success of restructuring in any industry and must be conducted during and after the completion of the implementation of each initiative. Evaluation during the implementation phase serves to ensure that the direction of implementation set out in the business plan is being adhered to, verifies the validity of strategic decisions, identifies early deviations from promised outcomes, monitors adverse impacts, and makes it possible to make immediate improvements. The purpose of the post-completion evaluation of strategy implementation is to assess the efficiency and effectiveness of the business plan in achieving desired outcomes and to develop inputs for future strategic plans, assessments, and rewards.

It is important to think carefully about which outcomes need to be monitored or assessed. In some scenarios, the business plan evaluation is simply an informal assessment of how well the organisation is performing after the business plan is implemented. Does the organisation yield higher profits? Has it grown in revenue or gained new customers? Positive answers to these questions often lead to the belief that the business plan is successful. Although the importance of these outcomes is undeniable, focusing on these alone tends to miss the substance of the business plan.

Other critical factors can be intangible or hard to measure. During business plan evaluations, the chief of staff must look beyond the easily quantifiable financial results and help to create a perspective of the impact on the efficiency and effectiveness of the entire organisation. Measuring these interconnected results will in turn help management determine if corrective actions are needed. Chiefs of staff manage processes that link a business plan to monthly financial and operational performance.

Back in the Swedish infrastructure business, the Chief of Staff actively supported the implementation of the turnaround programme. The implementation had been monitored as part of the monthly management steering meeting, where the chief of staff prepared a summary for each action category to check whether the defined targets had been achieved. Furthermore, regular meetings with managers of all levels ensured the information flow throughout the organisation. For example, the chief of staff realised that the C-level decision to centralise the procurement function increased the organisational burden and diminished local purchasing efficiency since the operating model was decentralised and needed more tailored and individual support. As a reaction, the chief of staff introduced a centrally managed but decentrally executed partnership programme, which improved supplier relationships, generated additional business, and ensured higher subcontractor cost efficiency.

Remember, the number one reason that restructuring programmes fail is resistance from employees. Many employees resist change because they fear that the results will have negative consequences both for the company as a whole and for them personally. There might be layoffs or it might become more difficult to demonstrate success in general. These fears are not entirely unjustified, as restructuring is often based on financial objectives, and tends not to prioritise the well-being of the individual. The chief of staff therefore plays an important role in creating a new spirit of optimism amongst the employees and putting an end to the paralysis and apathy caused by the crisis.

The chief of staff is increasingly seen as an important position in companies faced with a restructuring need. They bring the ability to implement a structured approach to stabilise the business and provide transparency to internal stakeholders. This is especially important because incumbent local management teams often lack the experience of managing a unique distressed situation characterised by high pressure from creditors and interference from lenders. The chief of staff is an additional catalyst of the change process and complements the management board by adding essential competencies such as analytics, cross-functional programme management and a focus on soft skills. This helps to break the negative spiral, regain control of the company, and ensure that value is created and boosted.

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Learning From History

Lieutenant Colonel Guillaume Leuenberger
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Guillaume Leuenberger looks back on centuries of decision-making by military leaders and chiefs of staff.

"To decide, one needs an odd number of people, and three are too many", - Georges Clemenceau.

What characterises a crisis is the insufficiency of traditional means to deal with the situation. Any emergency or acute crisis forces leaders to take decisions quickly and in an unplanned manner. Therefore, the participatory style, aimed at appealing for ideas and gaining consensus, might not seem appropriate for making a quick decision. The explosion of information to be processed and the diversity of challenging problems to deal with in an emergency create the dream of returning to the previous situation, which is generally impossible. Chiefs of staff must think about those issues before the crisis to stay alert when unexpected events occur.

To be ready to cope with such situations, it might be necessary to set up a new management model that introduces third parties and an external contribution of means, information, skills, and energy to manage the crisis. The emergency will draw on confidence coming from the past to face situations with efficiency, without calling into question the positions, skills, and orders, or to compensate for the loss of meaning of the team, subject to inhibition of action.

Crises, by their very nature, cannot be handled according to habitual methods. Such situations require the chief of staff to design tools to make the appropriate decisions according to the circumstances' evolution. This is why decision-making is really at the heart of the issues related to these exceptional situations. Military history is rich in examples of good decision-making processes that also draw on the power of intuition and, sometimes, luck. This article aims to describe the main principles of the crisis decision-making process used by chiefs of staff in military operations, based on a historical approach to the discipline.

Decision-making at the operational level

The 'father of corporate strategy' Igor Ansoff describes three levels of decision-making. Senior managers take strategic decisions with long-term implications. Below them, tactical decision-makers focus on implementation. Between the two, operational decision-making is a complex reasoning process linked to operations. This process relies on several steps, including knowledge acquisition, problem framing, choice selection, and action control. It can depend on theoretical structures and is often managed by a multidisciplinary team: what in a military context is called ‘the staff’.

In the broadest sense, decision-making is a movement, activated when action is perceived as necessary to cope with a problematic situation. Still, this action cannot be a reflex. Thus, decision-making relies on complex cognitive procedures, which rational or metaphysical arguments can support. Numerous theories and philosophical currents deal with this question, including praxeology, which is the interdisciplinary study of behaviour concerning performance and choice. This field primarily relies on cognitive sciences. It also has applications in social sciences, economics, general management, and, more importantly for this study, the science and art of war. As this article focuses on decision-making processes during a crisis, it is interesting to consider the theories allowing one to understand what command performance in operations can encompass. An easy start relies on the conceptualisation of the notion of operational decision-making. It is thus possible to clarify the links between decision-making processes, the means to enable it (like a staff) and the decision-maker (the chief of staff).

Ancient origins

In the military realm, everything starts with a confrontation. The military strategist André Beaufre defines strategy as ‘the art of the dialectic of wills using force to resolve conflicts’. Dialectics has indeed been a critical component of Western philosophy since antiquity. In Plato’s dialogues, it designates a movement of thought opposing and confronting to reach knowledge. Then, during the Renaissance, Machiavelli developed his principle of Fortuna and Virtù to extend the Aristotelian approach. He postulated that nature is only noticeable through contingency (Fortuna) and that it is mainly subjectivity and intuition (Virtù) that would allow the decision-maker to solve a problem. In contrast, Descartes considered intelligence and pure reason as the only means to effectively act like humans (ego sum, ego existo). During the Enlightenment, Kant developed a view in opposition with Cartesians and examined the uncertainty of metaphysical argumentation concerning the universe causes and the first knowledge principles.

One of the very first tactical reasoning methods can be attributed to du Praissac in the early 17th century: ‘Any military question can be resolved by, if, with whom, where, when, how, & how much…’. This excerpt testifies to the need of any military leader to adopt a rational approach to battle. In the spirit of Enlightenment philosophy, Guibert , Bourcet and Joly de Mazeroy then developed other methods to design the most effective manner to make decisions during a war. This short overview of the decision-making history shows the evolution of the discipline and the necessity to draw principles. However, former military experience also indicates that those principles cannot be considered the only way to decide.

Crisis management: adapting the principles

‘Simple is always wrong. What is not simple is useless’. This reflection by poet and philosopher Paul Valéry enlightens the conduct of modern operations. Indeed, the return of conventional conflicts and the hybridisation of warfare lead us to question the relevance of traditional decision-making methods when faced with extraordinary or unprecedented situations. The French General Marshal Foch emphasised the necessity of setting up ‘fixed principles, to be applied variably, according to every situation and circumstances, which are always particular'. As a result, obedience to these principles is never going to be easy! The Prussian General Carl von Clausewitz sums up the problem of decision-making in wartime and the required skills to solve it: 'War is the realm of uncertainty; three-quarters of the elements on which action is based remain in the mists of more or less great uncertainty. More than in any other field, a subtle and penetrating intelligence must be able to discern and instinctively appreciate the truth'. Clausewitz conceptualises uncertainty around two key concepts: friction and 'fog of war', to which he adds two phenomena: chance and disorder. Subsequently, since 'the unknown is the governing factor of war', as Foch writes it, the chief of staff must consider action by integrating this fact, not denying it.

Therefore, the hallmark of military leaders would not only be their skill to free themselves from the temptation of absolute rationality, but also their ability to rely on their intuition, and, finally, their willingness to take risks. In his masterpiece "Le fil de l'épée", Charles de Gaulle explains how the leader's instinct provides a concrete basis to act. 'Appreciating the circumstances in every particular case is, therefore, the essential role of the leader. [...] It is based on contingencies that action must be built'. However, he continues, instinct cannot be enough. The ability to synthesise is also necessary to drive each factor to its proper place. This synthesis must be accompanied by the power to abstract oneself from ambient pressures: 'All the great men of action were meditators. To the highest degree, they all possessed the ability to withdraw into themselves'. The philosopher Henri Bergson also professed the same principles in his lectures:

- Contingency of action
- The role of inner deliberation
- The importance of fair judgement

The staff: an indispensable decision-making tool for leaders during crisis

Leadership can be considered an art, as it is centred on a leader's personality, talent and expression of personal intent. But it is also a science, as it cannot be effective without methods, systems and organisations. As General Dwight D. Eisenhower emphasised, 'the plan itself is no value, but planning is everything'. The virtue of planning lies first and foremost in the fact that it offers a 'map of possibilities' and a shared vision to the different actors and levels (from the political to the tactical level) to organise collective action.

The ability to make operational decisions seems to result from a particular alchemy, the effects of which are never specific. Napoleon had weaknesses throughout his campaigns, which finally led him to defeat at Waterloo. Therefore, time and years might alter or strengthen a leader's decision-making ability. Like heroism, military genius is probably not a consistent concept for individuals: it firmly remains dependent on circumstances and the environment. Therefore, any decision-maker should be assisted in their command by a small and immediate group of subordinates, facilitating their comprehension of the environment and enabling them to conceive, execute their intention, and then develop it in the most efficient way. This is the role of the staff.

In France, it was with Napoleon that the general staff was fully established. However, its activities were mainly confined to drafting the Emperor's orders and administering the troops in the field. Louis Alexandre Berthier, often considered a poor tactician but an outstanding organiser, conceptualised and set up the system which still characterises most modern staff. The approach enabled Marshal Joffre to state in 1918: 'During the first weeks of the war, we could not have done what we did if the great staffs had not remained like rocks amid the storm, spreading clarity and composure around them. They kept in the most exhausting work, in the course of a terrible moral ordeal, clarity of judgement, ease of adaptation, a skill of execution from which victory was to come'. However, in 1940, the French staff were outclassed by the Germans. The French were slow to integrate technological progress and the new conditions of modern warfare into their command organisation, making them progressively inoperative during the interwar period. The historian Marc Bloch wrote that 'an idea, in positive sciences or techniques, only has value as an image or shortcut of concrete facts. Otherwise, it is reduced to its label, which only covers a little emptiness'. Therefore, the 1940 defeat was, above all, a defeat of thought, mainly that of the general staff.

In this type of pyramidal organisation, the chief of staff's role is essential to coordinate the branches' activities and anticipate actions. As collective work requires procedures and standardisation of parts and outputs, the CoS function also guarantees the coherence and timely production of the necessary orders to subordinate units. Then, the hallmark of great leaders is to know how to surround themselves with officers capable of advising, understanding, interpreting, translating and concretely implementing their intuition and will. Referring to General de Lattre in Indochina, General Beaufre evokes this fundamental dimension. 'His method is personal: he prepared his elaboration by carefully choosing the men surrounding him. Collectively, it is with them that he will gradually mature his decision'.

Since the end of the 19th century, sociology, management, and cognitive sciences have been working to develop organisational models that guarantee optimal rationality in decision-making within companies. From 1890 onwards, the American engineer Frederick Taylor developed principles and methods leading to what was to become the scientific organisation of work. Taylorism introduced the distinction between operational functions and functional departments within companies. Translated into French in 1912, Taylor's work also influenced that of a French company director, Henri Fayol, who was considered one of the management pioneers. In 1916, Fayol developed a theory that the leader is the critical element in a company's management.

Suppose they are responsible for the success or failure of a company. In that case, the leader must possess specific qualities which can only be acquired through training and experience:

- Physical health and vigour
- Intelligence and intellectual vitality
- Moral qualities (willpower, perseverance, daring, the courage of responsibility, sense of duty, concern for the general interest)
- A solid general culture
- Wide-ranging competence in the profession characteristic of the company
- Knowledge of management
- The art of handling people

However, Fayol introduces the idea that they are not sufficient even if technical skills are necessary to select future leaders. Starting from the premise that leaders can only control a small number of people, they must be able to rely on experts (a staff) and management tools. For Fayol, a company manager performs five acts that he calls ‘elements of administration’: planning, organising, commanding, coordinating and controlling. Finally, he develops in detail modern management tools, such as dashboards for management control or strategic intelligence for anticipation. These tools are intended to ensure that the decision-making process is as rational as possible. All of the principles set out by Fayol can be found today in what the military call Command & Control (C2).

But the rationality instituted by the organisation does not guarantee the rationality of the decision taken. The political scientist Herbert Simon is considered the father of decision theory and the concept of bounded rationality, for which he received the Nobel Prize. He postulates that in a unique environment, the leader does not choose ‘the best solution’ but the most satisfactory one, considering their degree of information, motivation, and actual capacity to act. Randomness, chance and unpredictability undermine our ability to use determinism and, therefore, the principle of causality to our advantage. In his work, he distinguishes between what he calls substantive rationality (the perfect Cartesian rationality), the French positivist approach (which assumes de facto that the individual has all the necessary information) and sufficient ‘‘calculation’’ capacity to make the optimal decision. Since these conditions rarely meet, he turns to a middle ground between total rationality and the renunciation of all rationality, which he calls procedural rationality. That is a mode of reasoning based on procedures that mitigate the uncertainty factor limiting rationality.

Simon’s work also includes his theorisation of the concept of the staff (civil or military). He insists on the triple interest covered by an adapted organisation in the decision-making process:

1. The creation and use of routine procedures make it possible to better deal with uncertainty.
2. The organisation makes it possible to divide the decision-making process between several experts.
3. The sequencing of the decision-making process limits the risk of error and can help correct assessment errors.

Simon thus attributes the following linear elements to any decision-making process:

- The problem identification and information acquisition to solve it;
- A research process to discover goals and formulate specific objectives;
- The definition and selection of options to achieve these objectives;
- Evaluation of the results;
- Determining a performance strategy.

It is, therefore, not surprising that this entire sequence is now found in military and civilian operational decision-making methods, including in particular NATO’s operational reasoning method, the Comprehensive Operations Planning Directive (COPD).

Even if experience shows that the decision-making process rarely leads in a straight line from identifying the problem to its solution (the end state), there is value in this process, as it allows decision-makers to validate the intermediate conclusions of their staff at specific points before taking action. Pragmatism and common sense should in principle lead to the very flexible use of these methods.

Finally, based on this difficulty of making a decision in a complex and evolving environment, a US Air Force pilot, John Boyd, established in 1960 a diagram to conceptualise the way in which he would beat all his students during air combat simulations. He described four sequential processes in a decision loop: 'Observe, Orient, Decide and Act' (OODA). Recognising that any logical model of reality is incomplete or inconsistent, the cycle must adapt to each new observation. This concept has proved to be applicable in the business world. This loop can be compared, for example, to the Deming Wheel used in quality management (PDCA / Plan, Do, Check, Act).

Guillaume Leuenberger is a French cavalry officer with a wide background in mountain warfare. His 17 years of experience linked him with different military Chief of Staff roles, from tactics to strategy. He successfully attented the British Advanced Command and Staff Course and he is now serving in the NATO Rapid Reaction Corps Headquarters, based in France.

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Managing Without a Manual

Massimo Zaccheroni
Executive Assistant Chief of Staff, NATO
Allied Joint Force Command Naples

Massimo Zaccheroni discusses the need for flexibility and creative thinking in responding to a military crisis.

Is handling a military crisis just like handling any other type of crisis? The answer is yes—and no. The key difference is the higher cost of failure, with consequences ranging from loss of lives to loss of institutional credibility. The most obvious similarity—which may not be expected by people unfamiliar with military organisations—is the need to navigate organisational complexity.

For the past five years I have been Chief of Staff Executive Assistant to NATO's Allied Joint Force Command in Naples, after a long career in a number of different military organisations. This article draws on that experience, and in particular the NATO response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, to suggest some of the most important skills that a chief of staff needs in the face of a military crisis.

Crisis management requires, first of all, a collective response that works across the full military spectrum to ensure that the strategic agenda is properly harmonised with the supporting 'security' effort. During the recent Ukraine crisis—handled by NATO because it straddles both the strategic/political level and the operational level (where my analysis comes from)—the chief of staff's duties focused on making time, information, and decision processes more effective. It is essential when managing a crisis to establish clarity within the different areas that are part of the problem- solving process and make the line of command the single communication channel to the leadership. Sharing managing roles—but not decisions— can help if well coordinated, which is where the skills of the chief of staff are critical. Establishing the right communication lanes is key to achieving staff synchronisation and effective response; the staff must recognise the ultimate objective, but not necessarily all the individual steps on the way to achieving it in order to avoid unexpected and misleading cross-functional actions.

The chief of staff creates connections between the various stakeholders and keeps their focus on the final target.

The challenge was, and is, to consider all national dynamics very carefully. An organisation such as NATO, based on the cooperation of 30 countries, is perceived to be solid and effective only if it listens to all opinions; but the chief of staff role must retain the right to 'think outside the box' and this may not always satisfy the community. Even in an organisation where 'consensus' is paramount, the chief of staff—at operational level—knows when to put the ideal aside and keep the staff on course despite what may happen diplomatically speaking.

I know that there are countries whose national agendas sometimes drive the way a crisis is managed at the political level but, a chief of staff must be driven by the principle of the strategic goal. To be able to plan my staff actions in the present, I need to have a clear goal in every subsequent future step. I know that to make the operational difference, daily habits must be congruent with my commander's purpose.

The deployment of a number of units from different NATO countries along the so-called 'Eastern front' might not be seen, politically, as a sign of relaxation in the diplomatic efforts towards the overall achievement of the Peace, but it makes the operational difference, which is the strategic goal of the alliance.

Discipline is vital to 'keep the course' for the contributing staff. Military crises inevitably present a variety of obstacles. In particular, the enemy is by definition a disruptor, and must always be viewed with an 'alternative', even creative mindset. Being compressed within schemes does not help, and although military procedures are well defined by standards and instructions, maintaining flexibility is a chief-of-staff-specific call to set the right conditions for an 'effect-based' approach to the problem. 'Effect-based operations' refer to combining military and non-military methods in a systems framework to achieve a particular effect. Effect-based operational actions could not always make the NATO community happy, but are the main tools to streamline the strategic goal and synchronise everyone's effort to succeed in the plan.

Summing up we can easily say—despite not exactly sounding very much like a military way of thinking, it is my personal experience—there is no manual for managing and navigating a crisis like the ones that NATO is currently involved in. An efficient chief of staff, though, will quickly adapt and act to maintain the alignment of the staff and provide relevant and decisive reports to the commander.

Evaluating opportunities must be at the top of '*way of thinking*'

During the Ukraine crisis, the identification of phases within a planning framework has shaped the role of the chief of staff: it has helped characterise the tasks and serves as a valuable indicator for the staff to navigate the range of possibilities that can be brought to bear on problems . This has taken me through a series of combined steps that drives leadership attitude and provides the staff with tools to have a better understanding of the complex dynamics surrounding the problem. These steps can be summarised as:

Understanding the problem: the chief of staff is given a comprehensive view of the issues leading towards a substantial shaping of the general situation;

Assessing the situation and identifying possible courses of action: the chief of staff, of course, acts as pivot reference for the staff to grant an adequate level of granularity of the situation and help to identify the best way to proceed;

Choosing the desired outcome and one particular course of action: the chief of staff consults regularly with the commander to understand the preferred outcome (either to confirm the existing ones or understand new ones if any) and, as directed, guide the staff to the correct selection based on critical thinking;

Developing a detailed and executable plan: the chief of staff remains the 'centre of gravity' for the staff when it is about maintaining the lead and must always be seen as the sole interlocutor for critical decision making; this is not easy to reach and crisis management may create hampering situations that require direct and strong control and, most importantly, full confidence in the cross-functional ability of the staff.

Conclusion

This is a very demanding role to perform when this type of crisis breaks and, although I am perfectly aware that it might not fully applicable in other realities, I still consider it a privilege to have the opportunity to challenge myself, first of all, and the general public opinion, as peculiar actions could be not easy understood from outside. As I said above strategic communication is the highest priority: not to achieve consensus but to maintain focus on the final goal without, or with minimal, discrepancies, and to reduce operational risks. Managing risks is at the top of daily routine for the chief of staff, and a clear and concise risk assessment must flow into the decision-making with an hourly rhythm to function as a definitive key to success.

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Lessons From the COVID Front Line

Chris Keeley and Sarah Liston
NYC Test & Trace Corps

Chris Keeley and Sarah Liston reflect on their experiences in NYC Test & Trace Corps, the organisation created in 2020 by New York City to respond to COVID-19

Sarah: New York's first COVID-19 case was identified on 1 March 2020. By 29 March, over 30,000 cases had been confirmed and by 6 April New York City had nearly 25% of the total deaths from COVID-19 in the U.S. Healthcare workers were trying to keep up with the endless demand that this new virus inflicted on our hospitals and on their own physical and mental health. What were you doing during this time?

Chris: I was an operational leader at NYC Health & Hospitals, which is the largest municipal healthcare system in the United States. In early March 2020 I was asked to help build a telephone hotline that would allow hundreds of medical providers to support New Yorkers concerned about, exposed to, or infected by COVID. The hotline fielded tens of thousands of calls and helped relieve some of the pressure on the already overflowing emergency departments. By later in the month, the ICUs and hospitals remained strained and we needed additional staff capacity. I worked with partners in other New York City agencies, with the U.S. Department of Defense, and countless volunteer and staffing agencies to cultivate a clinical workforce that could come into the ICUs at our 11 hospitals. It quickly became clear that the pre-existing volunteer structure and provider credentialing process was not built for a system-level, region-wide crush, such as we experienced in the first wave of COVID in NYC.

Sarah: I remember how so many healthcare workers from all around the country were coming to New York at that time. Did they all have to go through that provider credentialing process?
Chris: Any medical providers working at any of our 11 hospitals went through that process, yes. We needed to know they were qualified medical providers before allowing them to care for patients. We built an entirely new process and an online tool that would take our 6–9 month credentialing process down to 96 hours. We very quickly streamlined the process even further and got it down to within 24 hours. That meant we could tell a volunteer doctor in California to get on the plane that day and that we'd have them cleared to serve patients the next day.

Sarah: What was the day-to-day team leading experience like during that time?

Chris: We'd need to work with a large team of internal and external partners to get it right. Each day I would share with my immediate team the number of staff and number of staff hours that we directly made available on the frontlines of the COVID fight based on the previous day's work. For example, I'd tell them we'd cleared 250 providers the day before and each provider will work 12-hour shifts for the next 7 days. That meant our work that one day made possible 21,000 clinic hours in the ICU that week and that we'd need to do the same today and the next day and the day after that. I'd ask someone from the team to spend a few minutes to informally model how many patients those providers might serve during those 21,000 hours so that they could share that impact with the team the next day. The team stayed motivated, focused, and effective despite needing to work 16–20 hour days every day for well over a month.

Sarah: What is one of the things you are most proud of about that effort?

Chris: I was most pleased to see that when I needed to transition into Test & Trace to help build out the contact tracing and COVID testing infrastructure that I could step back from the surge staffing work with confidence that the process and team could—and did—sustain it without me. It's two years later and that same process is still effectively used today for our testing sites and elsewhere.

Sarah: In his Chief of Staff piece from January 2022, Rob Dickins writes 'the initial and most common question has often been "What does a chief of staff do?"' Before you started your first chief of staff position, did you know what a chief of staff did?

Chris: Like a lot of people my age and older, you think of a chief of staff and you see Leo and Josh from the West Wing. You know… the walk-and-talk, making million- or billion-dollar decisions with limited information, intense loyalty to the mission, and keeping the principal from getting bogged down in the interpersonal nonsense that can be unavoidable in a large organisation. And being quick witted seemed to be a requirement, at least in those Sorkin versions of the role.

Sarah: After you had been in the position for a while, how did your expectations match up with the reality of the role?

Chris: For me, one of the biggest differences was coming to recognise that it's all about communications among the team and managing without authority. You can manage on behalf of the principal and say 'do this because the boss said so and I'm here to make sure you don't mess it up' or you can say 'let's figure this out together'. I've found that collaborative approach to be the more effective 100% of the time. Keith Ferrazzi's recent book Leading Without Authority articulated this idea well. He articulates it with lots more dimension than that so I don't want to sell it short, but I imagine his idea of co-elevation as someone intentionally putting on blinders to the table of organisation. That you work with who you need to, and find a way to make it happen, regardless of title or 'small p' politics.

Sarah: You have worked as a chief of staff in many capacities, which, having never held that position until working for you now, I am glad I didn't know until very recently because I would have been super intimidated.

Chris: I thought you crushed it as chief of staff for the City's contact tracing programme. From what I saw, it helped in your role that you had been with the programme from the start and had served as a frontline contact tracer. Is that accurate?

Sarah: My experience on the front lines as a contact tracer profoundly shaped my work as chief of staff. It's been said you don't have to know how to hold a broom to tell if the floor is clean. But I say, it sure doesn't hurt. Knowing first-hand how contact tracers executed their mission and the challenges they faced, was invaluable to my work addressing bigger-picture issues as chief of staff. Also, as a contact tracer, I saw the positive impact of Trace's work call-by-call in real-time. That kept me energised and passionate when I had the opportunity to serve our mission at a higher level.

Above all, speaking with thousands of fellow New Yorkers who either had COVID or had been exposed to it is about as real as it gets when it comes to learning, practising, and honing two skills that I think are indispensable in any leadership role, especially for a chief of staff: empathy and active listening. In addition to contact tracing and offering crucial resources like free at-home meal delivery and the option to stay at one of our quarantine hotels at no cost, many of those calls evolved from their initial purpose into conversations about fear, loneliness, and uncertainty about what to do next. Learning to, metaphorically-speaking, meet the person where they are, listen and understand what they are saying—both explicitly and implicitly—and to provide genuine support and reassurance with referrals and actions made for the most successful calls. I found myself constantly drawing on that experience in my role as chief of staff because so much of the role is about communicating, listening, connecting, collaborating, and supporting.

Chris: What were some of the challenges of stepping into a chief of staff role for the first time?

Sarah: The biggest challenge was simply my own self-doubt. I had never served as a chief of staff before and I thought that would be a real obstacle. My resume did not have all the bells and whistles, whether educational or in terms of work experience, that one might expect to see in a traditional candidate's background. But as I quickly learned, much to my surprise and relief, many of the seemingly unrelated things that I have done in my career provided skills and experience that set me up well for the job. My background—which runs the gamut from spokesperson for a District Attorney to owner of a vintage clothing boutique to event planning and producing cabaret shows—was a great fit. Each of those things involved skills that are integral to the role of chief of staff: managing lots of moving parts, juggling competing urgencies, working with various personalities, keeping an eye on the whole while tending to the fine details, thinking strategically, staying agile and being ready to quickly pivot to plan B (or C), making stuff happen, and (my personal favourite) navigating ambiguity—which would be a fun topic to explore with you in a future conversation.

In his article, Dickins discusses three potential 'orientations' of a chief of staff: orienting your focus towards the principal, orienting it towards the leadership team, and orienting it towards the organisation often like a COO would. Which of those orientations appealed to you the most and why?

Chris: The three orientations Dickins laid out rung pretty true to me. In my prior roles I oriented myself toward the leadership team and the organisation, with less emphasis on the principal. I see the value in the principal orientation, but I don't think it's what makes me happy or where I excel. In this organisation, I'm actually the COO, but I still found myself constantly acting like a chief of staff. I've been responsible for building out and managing our community and school testing programmes, mass vaccination, and at-home vaccine programmes, supply chain and logistics, administration, and at times our outreach teams and more. I'm realising now as I have time to reflect on it more intentionally that while those teams all reported to me, I think I managed them as though they didn't. I managed them, I think—though we'd need to ask them if this is true—as though they were independent teams and I was helping those team leaders craft their own way in collaboration with their individual teams. There were definitely moments where I had to make an executive decision and move us forward, but largely I was keeping a safe but watchful distance and supporting them to manage their own teams. I think I was acting in some ways less like a chief operating officer and more like a chief of staff that was coaching and supporting a manager that reported up elsewhere.

How about you? Do you see your role at Test & Trace reflected in one of those three orientations?

Sarah: I do. It's a hybrid between serving the leadership team and the organisation and seems to be in line with what you said your focus has been in your prior roles. I suspect that, like you, I find more joy in orienting myself toward the collective rather than the principal. I have not yet been a chief of staff in a principal-oriented setting, and perhaps I would like it. But I have so enjoyed the coming together and 'worlds collide' collective that exists at Test & Trace that I can't imagine giving up that bird's eye view and the ability to move across departments connecting the dots. Kind of feels like a super power – not in the traditional sense of being 'powerful', but finally being able to fly freely in a professional sense rather than being anchored down or boxed in.

Test & Trace had a number of chiefs of staff in different areas of the organisation. How do those roles fit into the organisational structure?

Chris: We've been a chief of staff rich environment, haven't we? We had one for the Deputy Executive Director, one for the Director of Trace, I was a former chief of staff, and our former deputy executive director and one of our primary partners from City Hall were both former chiefs of staff at major agencies in the federal government. In addition to that, some of our major programmes reporting to me, like the school testing programme and our data and analytics vertical, have their own chiefs of staff. Considering we had probably 7,000 employees and a very sizable budget, it makes sense we needed more than one! I think each of those people that served as chiefs of staff in Test & Trace, along with those who were former chiefs of staff, were each effective in their own way, but they all shared those core chief of staff instincts—to overcommunicate, to identify gaps that we'd need to manage toward or work around, and to place a heavy emphasis on team morale.

Sarah: When you spoke earlier about leading the effort to quickly get much-needed healthcare workers on the frontlines in NYC's COVID response, you talked about using data to quantify success. Dickins has written about the challenges of measuring the success of a chief of staff because the nature of the role doesn't allow for the same concrete, 'metrics-oriented' goal posts. How do you quantify the success of a chief of staff?

Chris: I think there's two metrics. First, whether the team as a whole is accomplishing the goals they're assigned to accomplish. Second, whether they're positioning the team to fight the next fight. In a sports setting, the chief of staff would be the field captain. I'd look to see if the team is executing on the field the way they need to, making smart adjustments as the game develops.

And then I'd look at feeling of the team between gamedays, between scrums. The chief of staff needs to keep the comradery and the morale high. They need to make sure everyone has the opportunity to voice their concerns and have them addressed. They also need to address toxins head-on in a way that keeps them from infecting the team. My metrics for a chief of staff are measured by whether the team is advancing strategically and team-building as they do it.

Your data question reminds me of one of our colleagues who was a former chief of staff. She managed inter-agency work around the vaccine rollout in New York and she would hold standing meetings to review detailed data to be sure were we getting vaccine out to New Yorkers throughout the City and to manage the team, but she also consistently used the venue to do intentional team-building. She'd have someone from the Health Department do 'vaccine trivia' once a week to educate everyone about vaccines and vaccine hesitancy over the centuries. It was super interesting and a great way to have everyone contextualise their day-to-day work beyond COVID. And then she'd end every meeting with what became the mantra 'Vaccines are joyful', which I always loved. On stressful days it would sometimes become 'vaccines are [bleeping] joyful' which would reflect the team's frustrations in a given moment, while keeping the drumbeat going. It was a great reminder that no matter how hard the moment was, we were doing something that was saving lives, that would get our city through the pandemic, and that while the tactical work can be hard, in the grand scheme it was and it should be downright joyful. That type of on-the-field, real-time morale boosting and team building, to me, is what a good leader and a good chief of staff does.

You mentioned you were glad you didn't know I'd been a chief of staff before. What was it like being chief of staff for someone that had been one themselves? And being chief of staff in such an emergency-type setting?

Sarah: I can totally see how your chief of staff experiences have heavily influenced the way you lead. As you described your leadership style earlier—stepping back to allow the space for team leaders to craft their own way—that explains why you never once said to me, 'When I was a chief of staff, I did it this way'. Looking back, I really appreciate that because I feel it gave me a safe space to grow and learn on my own instead of constantly thinking 'how did Chris do this or that when he was a chief of staff?' I think the invisible hand has so much more positive power than the heavy hand. And the role of chief of staff always makes me think of an invisible hand – and Josh and Leo from West Wing too!

In terms of being a chief of staff in a public health emergency setting, I found it exhilarating to be able to act and give back during what often felt like such a helpless time. I have always been drawn to public service, but I have never felt such a sense of purpose and accomplishment in a professional setting as I did as Trace Chief of Staff. One of the many reasons that I felt such a sense of purpose and accomplishment is because you fostered a such collaborative work environment. The culture at Test & Trace welcomed new connections and encouraged everyone to voice their ideas, thoughts, and opinions —including in group forums with senior leadership. That surprised me a bit when I first started and really buoyed my sense of belonging to (what will go down in the books as) an historic, life-saving mission.

Chris Keeley is Chief Operating Officer, Deputy Executive Director, and Acting Director of Contact Tracing

Sarah Liston is Chief of Staff to Chris in his role as Acting Director of Trace. She started as a contact tracer in July 2020 before transitioning to serve as a chief of staff for the first time in September 2021.

NYC Test & Trace Corps is a partnership between NYC Health + Hospitals, NYC Department of Health and Mental Hygiene, other city agencies, and community-based organisations. As of May 2022, NYC Test & Trace Corps performed over 11 million tests, engaged more than 2 million New Yorkers in contact tracing, administered 1 million vaccines, and provided critical support services such as home food delivery and quarantine hotel services. All of its services have been made available to all New Yorkers regardless of income, gender identity, immigration status, insurance status or ability to pay.

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In the Eye of the Storm: A Profile of Joe Sciortino

Joe Sciortino
Chief of Staff, FEMA Region 2

Alexandra Atkeson, The Chief of Staff Association, interviews Joe Scortino about his experiences in crisis and emergency management

Joe Sciortino never anticipated a career defined by crisis. He began his professional life in local government, ultimately becoming chief of staff to the Staten Island Borough President. In his day-to-day, Joe managed public works, transportation and regional development projects, getting to know his community intimately.

Suddenly, a crisis struck which transformed Joe's role as he knew it and shaped his future career trajectory. On 29 October 2012 Hurricane Sandy hit the shores of New Jersey and, as Joe says, 'the rest is history'.

Hurricane Sandy ravaged the east coast, causing extensive flooding, erosion, and damage that affected all of New Jersey. The magnitude of the destruction was unprecedented and the recovery effort presented a unique challenge for the city. As chief of staff to the Borough President, Joe became part of the response for Staten Island, helping to implement both immediate and long-term recovery projects. For Joe, 'everything was really new', especially working with federal agencies to coordinate the response.

Since Hurricane Sandy, and more recently Hurricane Maria, Joe has never left the world of crisis and emergency management. He now serves as chief of staff to the Regional Director of FEMA Region 2, which oversees federal emergency management efforts for the jurisdictions of New York, New Jersey, the US Virgin Islands, and Puerto Rico. After a decade of experience in managing crises, Joe has developed an acute ability to lead others in the midst of chaos.

Crisis management and response: keys to success

Soon after Joe assumed his current role as chief of staff within FEMA Region 2, the COVID-19 pandemic swept across the world. Adjusting to a new role while still going into the field every day during this global crisis was a challenging feat. Joe prioritised a few key principles which form the foundation of successful emergency management in any organisational context.

1. Communicate effectively

In the chaos of a rapidly unfolding crisis, clear communication is essential. Changing circumstances, disorganisation and misinformation can lead organisations into an extended game of ‘telephone tag’, which slows their response. As a chief of staff, Joe highlights the importance of maintaining lines of communication up and down the structure of the organisation.

To keep information up to date in an evolving emergency, Joe recommends that organisations plan structured ‘sync’ calls throughout the day. During an emergency, ‘staff want transparency’: having multiple updates across the organisation each day provides staff with the opportunity to share key developments and stay informed on the status of the ongoing crisis.

Similarly, as a gatekeeper, the chief of staff must ensure that their principal has access to accurate information. To provide their leader with situational awareness, the chief of staff must maintain the pulse of the organisation and report on key developments. In this capacity, Joe underscores the value of ‘communicating courageously’. Courageous communication requires that information is shared clearly and quickly, even if the update is negative or disappointing.

2. Foster strong relationships

Effective communication relies on a foundation of strong relationships. During a crisis, a chief of staff relies on the trust they have fostered both with their principal and with staff across the organisation. Sometimes, this base of trust must be established quickly. Over the course of the last two years, for example, Joe Sciortino has worked with five different principals. In cases like his, ‘the tempo of the relationship building will [need to] be fast’. But it is essential to successful crisis management: as a chief of staff during an emergency, ‘you are looked at as a wartime consigliere because you and your principal will be glued at the hip’.

In addition to establishing a close relationship to the principal, chiefs of staff must also understand and care for their organisation’s workforce. Joe advises his peers to ‘focus on the staff part of the chief of staff job title’. To monitor the health of the overall organisation, the chief of staff must check in with workers up and down the organisation to ensure they are coping well before, during and after a crisis. Joe emphasises the value of compassion, particularly in organisations that respond to help others during emergencies. He notes that staff in these circumstances ‘could be tired, burnt-out, or survivors themselves’.

As a chief of staff in any organisation, ‘you are there to help build and create an operating environment and you play a key role in organisational health’, says Joe. Where possible, Joe suggests, chiefs of staff should ‘put their personality into the role’, as it pays dividends to be ‘people-friendly, approachable and a good communicator’, especially when a crisis erupts.

3. Consider the big picture

When an emergency hits, it is easy to lose sight of greater goals and responsibilities as chaos and adrenaline flow through an organisation. Leaders and staff often abandon their usual functions and volunteer themselves for random tasks. While well-intentioned, this disorganisation hinders recovery efforts. In all organisations, Joe advises chiefs of staff to set up a ‘small crisis team with clearly identified roles and contingency plans’ for common events such as a loss of communications.

Similarly, an organisation's values are often deprioritised or abandoned during an emergency. As a chief of staff during times of crisis, Joe asserts that 'you have to [maintain] the holistic lens of the organisation and [ensure that] the values of the organisation are upheld'. As a chief of staff, 'you may not be the decision-maker, [but] you can [still] be an enabler and help drive decision making'. As an emergency unfolds, the chief of staff can leverage their position to influence the organisation's culture and ensure that values and objectives are maintained.

4. Retain stamina

It is important to emphasise that these 'keys' to crisis management success can be entirely undermined if the chief of staff cannot gather the energy to implement them. Working through a crisis necessitates going above and beyond to support the principal and organisation. It is not simply clocking in and out each day. 'You have to put the Mission and others first', says Joe. Maintaining personal stamina becomes both increasingly difficult and salient during a crisis.

As such, Joe highlights the importance of healthy habits, a balanced diet and taking 'mental breaks'. 'You have to find things that make you feel refreshed', Joe advises. These self-care practices allow you to reset, reflect, and re-enter the chaos with a greater sense of clarity.

Conclusion

Reflecting on his career, one marked by some of the most challenging crises of our time, Joe recognises both the immense difficulties and rewarding aspects of the chief of staff role. As he says, 'It's a selfless job and it's the best job'.

While you may not regularly confront existential emergencies in your own organisation, Joe's insights into crisis management can be useful to you when your organisation faces both big and small obstacles. Joe advises chiefs of staff in any sector to have a strong preparedness strategy, and above all else, confidence in their own abilities. 'Trust yourself', Joe reminds us; 'you are in this role for a reason'.

Joseph Sciortino, raised in Brooklyn, New York, has been in Government Service for 12 years and currently serves as the U.S. Federal Emergency Management Agency's Chief of Staff for Region 2 (NY, NJ, PR, USVI).

Far From a Dead End: A Profile of Matthew Geleta

Matthew Geleta
Chief of Staff, Bare

Matthew Geleta of Bare Cremations talks to the Chief of Staff Association's Henry Rhyu about moving from consultancy into a funeral service start-up

An Oxford maths graduate and Bain management consultant, Matthew Geleta took a seemingly unorthodox career turn in 2021 by becoming a chief of staff at Bare—an innovative funeral services startup that allows users to pre-pay and pre-organise funerals.

However, as we began exploring Matthew's career trajectory in the context of his broader personal philosophy of 'proactively seeking challenges', we got a better sense of why the chief of staff role, particularly in the funeral services industry, made so much sense for him.

Matthew explained that he has always been a 'challenge seeker' and that he gains great career satisfaction from succeeding in what he perceives to be the most difficult tasks. Part of his passion for actively seeking challenges stems from his belief that anticipating and welcoming change, both in one's personal life and with respect to one's organisation, is critical for building resilience and ensuring long-term success.

'When people are not exposed to change, they will be scared of change. I believe that to be happy, one must seek change instead of being reactive to it,' he said.

Matthew finds the funeral industry as a whole to be 'old school, resistant to change, templatised' and altogether 'fundamentally broken'. Steeped in tradition, the funeral industry has neither an innovative touch nor the willingness to adapt existing procedures to provide clients with a personalised, streamlined, yet affordable way to deal with the loss of a loved one.

So the chief of staff role at Bare presented him with the perfect challenge: a demanding position that others consult in times of organisational crisis, working in an out-dated industry that is in dire need of change.

Indeed, it immediately presented him with some surprising and distinctive difficulties that required sophisticated crisis- and change-management skills to overcome.

For instance, more established companies aggressively sought to maintain their dominance in the funeral industry by deliberately attacking Bare's reputation and spreading false negative rumours surrounding their operations and services. Matthew described how he had to ensure that Bare responded to these attacks diplomatically and allowed their services to speak for themselves.

Meanwhile, grieving consumers routinely expressed hesitation towards using a new type of funeral system. After all, as Matthew said, 'people do not know what they do not know'. He had to learn different ways to gain genuine trust from potential customers something that he could not achieve through his title alone.

Today, Bare operates in both Australia and the UK and its services have not gone unrecognised. Bare Cremation is the only ISO-certified funeral director in Australia, was Australian customer service organisation of the year in 2021, and, most importantly, is the only funeral director with more than 1000 verified 5-star customer reviews.

Reflecting on his contributions as a chief of staff to the success of Bare, Matthew had several pieces of advice for future chiefs of staff. First, in times of crisis, remember to critically and calmly analyse the issue instead of what most people do: panic first and then act.

Secondly, when spearheading organisational changes, be completely transparent about what you are actually capable of accomplishing. In other words, to gain genuine trust from other organisational members and consumers, chiefs of staff must never over-promise.

Finally, he urged chiefs of staff to realise that organisational changes do not occur in a vacuum. They must explain new initiatives in the context of their organisation's existing operations. For instance, when Bare scaled into the UK, he had to reimagine new operational models that would allow the UK branch to harmoniously exist in tandem with their existing services in Australia instead of simply replicating their existing operational models.

Matt is Chief of Staff at Bare, Australia's fastest growing death-tech startup. Prior to Bare, Matt worked as a Private Equity consultant at Bain & Company on several >$100M deals. Matt kick-started his career by dropping out of a PhD Scholarship at Cambridge to cofound fashion-tech startup HURR, the UK's first and largest peer-to-peer fashion rental company.

Towards a new paradigm in crisis management: AI-based Tools as a Solid Response to Increasingly Complicated Scenarios

Maurizio Maione
Chief of Staff, SEC Newgate

PR expert Maurizio Maione explains how a new approach to data can help improve organisations' communications response to crises

Does the traditional approach of 'planning for the worst and hoping for the best' still makes sense in today's data-rich environment and increasingly critical scenarios? Or are there more sophisticated tools making use of artificial intelligence (AI) technologies that could enhance the crisis-management masterplans intended to navigate successfully through complex contexts?

During nearly 20 years working in corporate advisory and, for the past year and a half, as chief of staff to one of the world's top 30 global PR advisors, I have been involved in developing innumerable crisis management plans and procedures.

Planning, preparing, and practising

When it comes to fast decision-making, which is what you need during critical and unexpected moments, the only way up is based on having most of the 'homework' done in advance. If you have a wide collection of 'ready to use' basic elements prepared and approved beforehand, the work of adjusting these elements to the concrete circumstances of a crisis and crafting a consistent narrative is smoother and easier.

This basic approach has been crafted over decades of safety management practice, of which aviation provides a very solid and user-friendly example. And as a result, corporations and organisations have packed their shelves with crisis communications manuals, procedures, scenarios and their related handbooks. The ability to foresee potential critical contexts from the widest possible perspectives, and to plan coherently, has made the distinction between successful organisations and those whose business existence was seriously threatened by the inefficiency of unplanned and unprocedural decision-making.

And the approach is still largely used, leads to decent performance, and is relatively up to date, at least as far as the preparedness stage is concerned.

While in the ‘safe area’ of prevention and mock crisis scenarios-testing we can plan and take the time to draft all procedures and the basic blocks of a future narrative while running desk research, analysis and database filing. And along with this we can rehearse and practise so that all models are ‘battle tested’, updated (if required), and the organisation’s performance can be measurable and easy to predict.

Even better, these days there are several examples of digitally based tools which can be used positively to support the preparation stage of crisis management. At SEC Newgate Australia we have been developing a crisis management app that helps communications professionals to keep all elements of a crisis management master plan under control . Other PR professionals have been successfully using AI-based tools to run fully automated rehearsal programmes with machine learning substituting media and PR senior experts to provide mock interviews and run media simulations based on a specific company framework.

When it comes to learning from a collection of existing documents, videos, and other types of content, and deriving from them the hottest topics and trickiest questions, the reading and searching abilities of a powerful PC are far faster and more efficient than any human professionals, no matter how senior or expert. Along with the technical superiority, if the interface for this output to engage staff to be trained is a PC screen this can add quantitative advantage, as sessions can be opened to a larger panel of trainees than in the traditional classroom-based, in-person training sessions.

Just as with mountaineers at the foot of a peak, planning and preparation is essential but, to stay in this expedition-related example, weather predictions are getting extra complicated. This is where the traditional prevention and planning approach might fall short.

The perfect storm: stirring a huge amount of data and sources

For organisations, the uncontrollable nature of social media, and the rapid expansion of data, can produce an effect as brutal as the effect of unpredictable extreme weather conditions on a summit expedition to an 8,000m peak. As brutal as that.

The huge amount of data and content, along with the endless series of stakeholders bearing their specific interests that are activated during a crisis, in fact clearly set a limit to the effectiveness of crisis planning as we knew it.

Who could possibly stay on top of the tons of data that existing reporting and monitoring systems flood over the organisation several times a day during a crisis? Who has the bandwidth to identify what is valuable and what is just background noise? Who is setting the route and navigating the perfect storm which is made of countless sources and pieces of content mostly not mediated by any professional system such as the media community or some other expert organisation?

While, in fact, the ability to listen and collect input from a wider and expanding set of sources has been incredibly improved over the last decade, via different sets of monitoring tools which report on print and social media, broadcast content and any other source which is digitally available, PR professionals and company communications experts still find it hard to navigate all this and, above all, might find the process of strategic assessment of all the information a pretty hard job to handle.

TRUE™ the first ever AI based platform to understand and assess reputation

So that is where AI and machine learning can provide a significant new paradigm to adapt crisis management to the extremely complicated period we are living in.

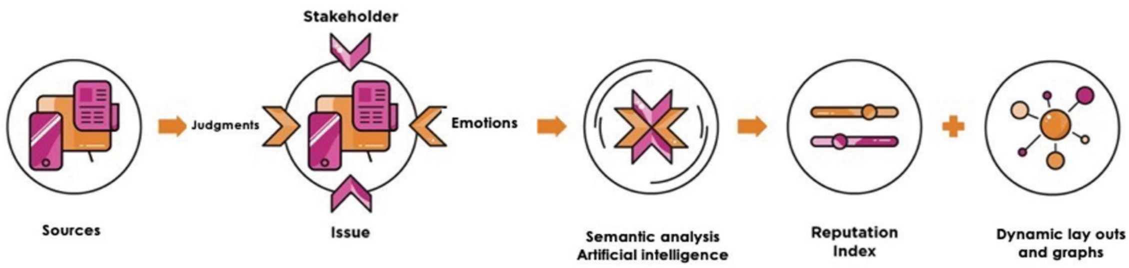
TRUE™ has been developed by SEC Newgate with Bocconi University and Imperial College in London and combines artificial intelligence and machine-learning technologies to semantic analysis . The most relevant feature of this combination is an unprecedented calculus potential (over 30 thousand pieces of digital content a day can be thoroughly assessed) which is applied to a full reading and classification of any digitally available content.

TRUE™ provides—via an algorithm which transforms a full set of semantic rules into a two-scale indicator system—a continuous score of an individual or organisation's reputation. The system, in fact, produces simultaneous scores on both dimensions that are relevant to the formation of the reputation: the judgment (fact based) and the opinion (emotionally based). The first score is set on a number scale from 1 to 100 while the sentiment is expressed on a colour scale from red to green.

The framework of this scientifically based measurement covers 47 emotions and five typical domains of an organisation (from governance to product, from innovation to performance and citizenship) matching with 17 concrete dimensions of reputation according to the Harris-Fombrun Corporate Reputation Quotient Model (CRQ) . All these elements are researched across all content to be assessed and provide numeric indicators, according to a set of different weights in order to classify each source according to relevance or 'importance'.

AI-based tools can provide precise and efficient analysis of existing data and present it via an objective approach (see the functional scheme of the platform below):

Picture 1: TRUE™ working flow



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The ability to process very high quantities of information, and assess and sort the output according to different set of values makes this platform ideal for field testing how AI solutions could be incorporated in up-to-date crisis management systems.

In a trial test that was run for a railway operator in the north of Italy, the data from the platform could be organised around geographic elements, so providing indications of any potential issue along each of the service lines.

At the same time the data and the reputation index could be expressed around specific elements (timing, quality of service, standards, ESG issues etc.) in order to test how specific actions could or could not influence the perceptions of segments of users or the wider panel of key stakeholders.

In addition, given the extraordinary capabilities and endless room for data analytics, this kind of system can provide significant support in intercepting minor signals, allowing for early warning and flagging possibilities.

All this is automatically generated, leaving staff and resources available for the necessary and unavoidable work of understanding the implications of the data, and strategic thinking.

Data and crisis management: a new challenge field for the Chiefs of Staff

The human factor, indeed, remains central and crucial for the efficient management of a crisis. It is important, therefore, to reserve as much time and resources as possible to analyse the output, to ask the right questions to the database and algorithms, and, in the end, to fully deploy the strategic thinking that organisations navigating a crisis urgently need.

This is why AI and machine learning seem to be more than a simple technology solution available to those in the risk and crisis management business. Like a firewall system, in fact, AI-powered tools can cut to the heart of the organisation and filter out of the background noise that, sooner or later, can transform a crisis into a nightmare.

When too much data is available and the ability to master this material is put at risk by an objective quantitative issue, organisations can trust new technologies to run—almost autonomously—the bulk part of the quantitative work. A machine can deliver this 'digestive' work more easily and efficiently than a human.

The more organisations support their staff in getting used to this new paradigm and losing (apparently) their grip on the non-essential part of the process, the better their response is likely to be during a crisis.

A new data-based culture is urgently required from senior officials if they want to stand at the forefront of an efficient crisis management system. The key principles of this new culture are simple:

1. Information is power, but this applies only to key data
2. Elaboration time is limited, so there is no need to worry about minor aspects
3. Concentrate on the key strategic elements of a crisis
4. 100% of control over the process is impossible, so trust analysts and their output
5. Treat hardware as a tool only, not as a means of adjusting reality to fit someone's specific vision

These 'easy' rules refer to key elements of an organisation's culture and purpose. This is about how we match data analytics with intelligence and human understanding and how we best use technologies to adapt our human-centric approach to fast-moving scenarios.

We can call this a cultural revolution that digital transformation is progressively pushing towards politics, business and society at large. From an organisational viewpoint this is an incredibly demanding transformation.

The chief of staff is a natural leader of this sort of transformation. Chiefs of staff are process experts and mostly dedicated to providing and supporting a team culture inside organisations. They tend to operate in complex contexts, negotiating and mediating between several different parties. Flexibility, adaptability and a bit of lateral thinking to adjust a strictly fact-based approach are part of their professional background and, indeed, they seem valuable assets to master the response to crisis and the impact on an organisation's reputation from adverse events.

The importance of lateral thinking and the ability to assess data is well illustrated by the efforts of the allied bomber command in World War II to improve survival rates by adding more armour to the bomber planes.

Too much armour, of course, would come at the expense of speed, so the command adopted a scientific approach: they counted up the bullet holes on planes as they returned from their missions to assess where they were most vulnerable. The planes all showed similar concentrations of bullet holes on the fuselage, outer wings, and the tail. The plan therefore was to add armour to all those heavily damaged areas—until, that is, the data was reviewed by a statistician called Abraham Wald. He pointed out that the command had only looked at planes that had returned. If planes were habitually making it back safely with bullet holes in the fuselage, that meant that hits in those places were not particularly dangerous. The armour was needed in places such as the cockpit and the engines, where they did not see any bullet holes, because any planes shot there never made it back.

Maurizio Maione, Chief of the CEO Staff at SEC Newgate SpA Italy's only global advocacy and communication advisor in the top 30 rankings and Regional director for Italy of the Chief of Staff Association. As Chief of Staff, a position that was recently created after the launch of the Transformational project aiming an doubling revenues in 4 years and establish SEC Newgate brand across the top 15 global PR firms, Maurizio supports the CEO in building solid processes and a common culture across 15 Countries in 5 Continents aligning a team of over 800 professionals globally.

References

- For the sake of this article the classic three steps approach to crisis management is accepted. According to this vision crisis management is mostly based on a three legged method: 1. Preparedness (which includes planning and training and desk research to set all potential relevant critical scenarios); 2. Response which refers to the actual way an organisation act when a crisis outbreaks; 3. Recovering that includes the mid-term activities aiming at assessing the extension of the impacts on an organisation's reputation following a critical event and the process of returning to an ex ante state of relations with the relevant stakeholders
- In the very extensive bibliography available on crisis communication the work by W. Timothy Coombs "*Applied Crisis Communications and Crisis Management*" SAGE publications 2014 provides a series of well analysed business cases
- SEC Newgate Australia has developed a mobile app which provides instant messaging, alerting and control over scheduled process in order to keep crisis management easy at all stages. This app is in the same line of other Group's digital properties such as EUEssential or Gov Up which provide automated mapping and data base services in the European and Italian institutional space respectively.
- See Ethan Schrieberg "*AI for PR Crisis Management*" at: https://www.toolbox.com/tech/artificial-intelligence/articles/ai-for-pr-crisis-management-could-help-tesla-cbs-and-you/
- A Paris based digital agency JIN has announced plans to develop a fully AI based media training and sales training tools to be used without trainers in person. On this pretty interesting topic a recent paper from a group of researchers provide insight on the two ways impact AI has in the media industry both from a production and users' ends. See Christoph Trattner, Dietmar Jannach, and others "*Responsible media technology and AI: challenges and research directions*", Springer November 2021 available on line at: https://link.springer.com/content/pdf/10.1007/s43681-021-00126-4.pdf
- Amongst the almost endless literature of Mountaineer disasters, Jon Krakauer's "*Into Thin Air*", Pan Publishing 2011 clearly provides an insight of the importance of planning and the effect of bad decision making at the background of a crisis
- To have a clear idea of the process that worn out traditional crisis management models in big data societies a good read is provided by Keers Boersma and Chiara Fonio (editors) "*Big Data, Surveillance and Crisis Management*" the Routledge Studies in Surveillance, Routledge Publishing, 2018
- TRUE™ is a proprietary tool developed over the last 4 years and worth an initial investment of 1,5 milion € thanks to special fiscal benefit provided by the Italian Industry Minister to promote innovation (Industria 4.0 scheme) which was launched In July 2020 in Italy. The platform can operate in 5 most relevant Western languages (Italian, English, French, German and Spanish) and can be adapted to other semantic contexts. We are now currently working on the second release on the platform to improve some operational features and ease the process of setting the initial processing parameters

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