Research Project Proposal: Meeting Multiple Threats and Hazards - Leading and Organizing for Resilience in National Security Bureaucracies

Research Questions

We seem to live in an age of increasing complexity in terms of who and what might threaten our safety and security: Terrorism, single-issue violent extremism, regional conflicts, the spread of weapons or materials of mass destruction, cyberattacks on critical infrastructure, cyberespionage, natural or man-made disasters, global pandemics, and extreme weather. Threats and hazards might materialize with little or no warning, interact in unforeseen ways, and have an impact far from their point of origin.

For the organizations and agencies entrusted with safeguarding national security and societal safety, planning for and organizing around only a few major threats and hazards no longer seems like the best option. Yet, seeking to plan for, prevent, and protect against an ever longer roster of potential contingencies might quickly deplete the resources of even large organizations and wealthy nations.

So, how best to organize for safety and security?

Increasingly, political and academic interest has centered on the concept of societal and organizational resilience. To match a complex and dynamic landscape of threats and hazards, the argument goes, societies, communities, and organizations need to become more resilient, i.e. develop the ability to keep functioning, adapting to, and bouncing back from inevitable negative surprises.¹

A substantial body of research has identified and described organizational traits and behaviors connected to resilient performance.² However, from a practical perspective, the crucial questions are how these traits and behaviours might arise and how they could be promoted within and by the organizations entrusted with national security and safety. This project will begin to throw light on these critical but neglected questions. It will draw on the findings of change management research³ and on the literature on

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2 Amongst other flat organizing, loosely coupled subsystems, dense horizontal and vertical information flows, continuous experimentation and mutation, and the ability to improvise (Hopkins 2006; Longstaff 2005, 22; Longstaff 2010, 21; Parker 2010, 265; Reason 2010; Weick and Sutcliffe 2007; Wildavsky 1991, 120).
3 Kotter 1995; Palmer and Dunford 2002; Weick and Quinn 1999.
organizational resilience to determine which specific leadership and management practices are more/less likely to promote organizational resilience.

These insights are then applied in a case study of the risk perceptions, change goals, and leadership concepts of upper management in the national security bureaucracy of Denmark. The project also includes interviews with four top executives, which do not form part of the national security bureaucracy, but whose agencies are in charge of different parts of the critical national infrastructure of Danish society – energy and food administration. The project asks: How do the prevalent leadership preferences and practices of these executives match the requirements of resilience leadership? How might the match be improved in order to promote stronger organizational resilience in light of a complex and dynamic landscape of threats and hazards?

**Approach: Elite Interviews**

The project relies on semi-structured interviews with executive managers. Even if top managers may not fully control their organizations, they inhabit privileged communication platforms and exercise power over formal structures, rules, and resource allocation. Their ability to influence on other organization members’ ideas and behaviors is significant and their perceptions, concepts, and priorities arguably provide insights into one of the central ingredients of organizational success, namely the degree to which executive leadership strategizes and leads in ways matched to a complex and dynamic threat environment.

A major strength of elite interviews is that elites are able to verbalize and communicate complex and possibly paradoxical perceptions, concepts, and intentions. As leadership of large bureaucratic organizations with multiple external stakeholders, subjected to frequent media scrutiny, and operating in a dynamic and complex environment is likely to entail complex and paradoxical issues, an exploratory approach based of elite interviews is arguably a good starting point for a study of resilience leadership.

**Case: Denmark**

The project focusses on Danish executives, but could be expanded to comprise more countries. Denmark is a small country, characterized by non-hierarchical forms of interaction and a high level of social trust.

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4 The upper management of intelligence services, defense departments, police services, cyber security organizations, and emergency management agencies.

5 Aberbach and Rockman 2002.

6 Funch, Hammann, Munck 2010.
These are arguably favorable pre-conditions for developing more decentralized and flexible forms of organizing, better matched to a complex environment than classical hierarchical bureaucracies. The Danish case might provide a window on emerging practices of organizing and of leadership that would be harder to cultivate and discern in larger countries. And the insights derived from a Danish case study might help inform the formulation of broader hypotheses about resilience leadership, which could be further tested and developed if the project is expanded to comprise more countries.

**Impact**

The project aims to generate practically applicable insights into which kind of management practices are more/less likely to enhance organizational resilience. The aim is to develop targeted advice as to how leadership and change management as currently practiced might be enhanced to better promote resilient organizational performance.

The project should make evident potential blind spots and untapped potentials in current management practices by applying new theoretical lenses (change management research) to an existing research field (organizational resilience) and by juxtaposing the resulting analytical insights with the perceptions and strategies of individuals in leadership positions in national security bureaucracies.

By relying on elite interviews and thereby directly involving upper management in the organizations under study, we expect that the study will raise awareness of the security issues involved and ensure that the findings and recommendations are communicated directly to relevant practitioners and policy makers.

**Deliverables**

- One peer reviewed article.
- One lecture in Stanford’s Security Matters on-line lectures initiative.
- A short publication of findings targeting policy-makers and/or managers in the security sector (printed by DEMA).
- On request: One or more short targeted on-site executive briefings of findings for selected agencies or policy makers.
- One or more short articles for Danish language publications, targeting policymakers, public sector administrators, and a broader interested public (Djøf-bladet, Weekendavisen, Ræson).

**Research Team**
The research will be carried out within the Governance, Organizations, and Security Program of Stanford University's Center for International Security and Cooperation (CISAC). See http://cisac.fsi.stanford.edu/research/organization/6069/67119

Lead researcher:

Anja Dalgaard-Nielsen is guest scholar at Stanford University, CISAC. From 2008 to 2014 she served on the board of directors of the Danish Security and Intelligence Service (PET), directing PET’s efforts in the areas of intelligence fusion, strategic terrorism threat analysis, preventive security efforts, and protective security. Previously, she worked as a research manager and senior researcher at the Danish Institute for International Studies (DIIS). She serves on the board of advisor of the Global Center on Cooperative Security, Washington DC and on the Board of Advisors of the Center for Asymmetric Threat Studies at the National Defence College in Sweden. She holds a Ph.D. from Johns Hopkins University SAIS, an MA in political science from the University of Aarhus, and an executive MA of public management and governance from Copenhagen Business School and the University of Copenhagen.

Reviewers and discussants:

Lynn Eden is Senior Research Scholar and Associate Director for Research at Stanford University, CISAC. Her area of expertise comprises organizational issues regarding nuclear policy and homeland security, U.S. foreign and military policy, arms control, and the social construction of science and technology. She holds a Ph.D from the University of Michigan.

Thomas Fingar is Oksenberg-Rohlen Distinguished Fellow at Stanford University, Freeman Spogli Institute for International Studies. From 2005 to 2008 he served as the first deputy director of national intelligence for analysis and as chairman of the National Intelligence Council. Previously, he served in a number of leadership positions in the US State Department’s Bureau of Intelligence and Research. Fingar is a graduate of Cornell University and holds a Ph.D from Stanford.

Budget and Project Timeline

Please see enclosed documents.

References


