Tourism Crisis Management: The Mindful Learning From Tourism Crises

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The mindful learning demonstrates how, if barriers are overcome, learning can contribute to effective crisis management through not only mitigating the negative effects but also potentially averting a crisis from occurring. This paper is an attempt to examine how tourism organizations can mindfully learn from crises and disasters and encourage the adoption of a mindful culture in their organizations. The results show that there are many barriers which impede organizations to learn mindfully and adjust themselves to the new situations. It also discusses that most tourism organizations neglected mindful organizational learning and paid more attention to superficial or single loop learning from tourism crises.

Key words: crisis management, mindful learning, learning barriers, tourism crisis

Introduction

While managers, nowadays, have more advanced tools to predict and manage crises, still too often fail to recognize the early warning signals of the next ones. The occurrence of recurrent crises in one organization or a destination is a proof to this claim. As an example, the occurrence of many terrorist attacks in hotels in the past decade in different parts of the world has not led to non-negligence of hotel industry from safety and security issues, and in some cases, we see the reoccurrence of the same incident in a destination like Bali, Indonesia (Bali bombing in 2002 and 2005). However, the cause of this negligence could be found in reluctance or lack of endeavor of decision makers to the mindful or in-depth learning from managing crises.

Failure to learn mindfully from tourism crisis management creates a grave concern of unpreparedness in confronting future uncertainties amongst tourism and travel industry. Surprisingly tourism crisis management literature lacks sufficient research on the subject of mindful learning from crisis management and at the same time, no specific study from tourism perspective was done to reckon possible barriers which may hinder in-depth learning. To date, the study of tourism crisis management has concentrated on exploring crisis impacts, response strategies, recovery and turnaround with paying limited attention to learning from crises and disasters

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(Faulkner, 2001; Henderson, 2002; Ghaderi et al, 2012; Blackman & Ritchie, 2008; Ritchie, 2004; Cohen and Neal; 2010; Hall, 2010). This tendency, in turn, provides lack of hindsight and preparedness among industry players for effective crisis management.

Mindful learning, however, is an attempt that not only the effects of crises can be mitigated, but also it prevents a crisis from happening. Unfortunately tourism crisis management literature lacks in-depth research on investigating the role of mindful learning in tourism crisis management and how tourism organizations learn and apply lessons while managing crises. Using the concept of mindfulness this study attempts to discover how a mindful learning can be incorporated in tourism crisis management and identify the barriers which hinder mindful learning. It also recommends mindful learning in organizational culture rather than mindless learning.

Methodology

This study is a conceptual paper which focuses on the concept of mindful learning in tourism crisis management. The paper reviews the current literature in other disciplines outside tourism in order to adopt some theories and concepts to the study of tourism crisis management. It uses secondary research results which have been done in management, economic, business and education areas. Incorporating the current model of mindful learning into tourism crisis studies this research, offers insights for further investigations and empirical research in this area of study.

Literature Review

Mindful Versus Mindless Learning in Crisis Management

Mindfulness is defined as "a flexible state of mind in which we are actively engaged in present, noticing new things and sensitive to context". When people are mindful, rules and routines may direct their behavior rather than predetermine it. From organizational perspective, when organizations look at issues from a single, rigid perspective and respond in an ad hoc manner, without critically questioning their strategies and actions, then mindlessness occurs (Veil, 2011). When people are in the state of mindlessness, they behave like machines that have been programmed to perform according to the sense the behavior made in the past, rather than the present (Langer, 2000). Mindfulness, however, looks carefully at the process of each situation and the preconceived notion of what the results should be.

Weick and Putnam (2006) in an interesting analogy discuss about the notion of mindfulness from the Eastern and Western perspectives and they argue that Eastern thought of mindfulness is grounded in Buddhism which suggests "means of enhancing attentional stability and clarity, and of then using these abilities in the introspective examination of conscious states to pursue the fundamental issues concerning consciousness itself" (Wallace, 2005 as cited in Weick and Putnam, 2006, p. 276). From Eastern perspective, mindfulness is the mental capability to hold on to current objects by collecting rambling concentration back to the wanted object. Moreover, in this thought, the attention is given to the internal processes of mind rather than to the contents of mind (Weick and Putnam, 2006).

The Western perspective which has been proposed by Langer (1989) and adopted by several organizational scholars (See for example, Weick et al, 1999; Fiol & O'Connor, 2003) is grounded in this concept that previous experience no longer

serve as an appropriate guide and the destruction "stirs the cognitive pot" (Weick & Putanam, 2006, p. 280). Lanager (1989) counts three features of mindfulness as: (1) active differentiation and refinement of existing distinctions (p. 138); (2) creation of new discrete categories out of the continuous streams of events that flow through activities (p. 157); and (3) a more nuanced appreciation of context and of alternative ways to deal with it (p. 159).

By knowing things that do not match our intentions, mindful learning creates an attentiveness that filters through routines and training to draw attention to what does not match our expectations (Veil, 2011). Mindful learning is an awareness to early warning signals which most often are hidden from sights or sometimes do not look real. It is indicating of double-loop learning which inquires the current believes and values, actions and decisions and reframe organizational structures (Argyris & Schon, 1978; Blackman & Ritchie, 2008; Faulkner, 2001; Henderson, 2003).

As Langer (1989) says, although people cannot be mindful all times, but they always have capabilities to be mindful of something. This statement also confirms the possibilities of being mindlessness in some situations, when barriers hinder mindful learning. Veil (2010) has shown the rhetorical barriers to mindful learning in the Mindful Learning Model (MLM). The model shows how if barriers overcome, organizations can learn mindfully, detect early warning signals by constantly reframing experiences and adapt the routine process (See figure 1).

Under the Mindful learning, organizations lessen the likelihood of forgetfulness of early warning signals and prepare themselves for future crises. Early warning signals can be any type of information which demonstrates a deviation from normality.
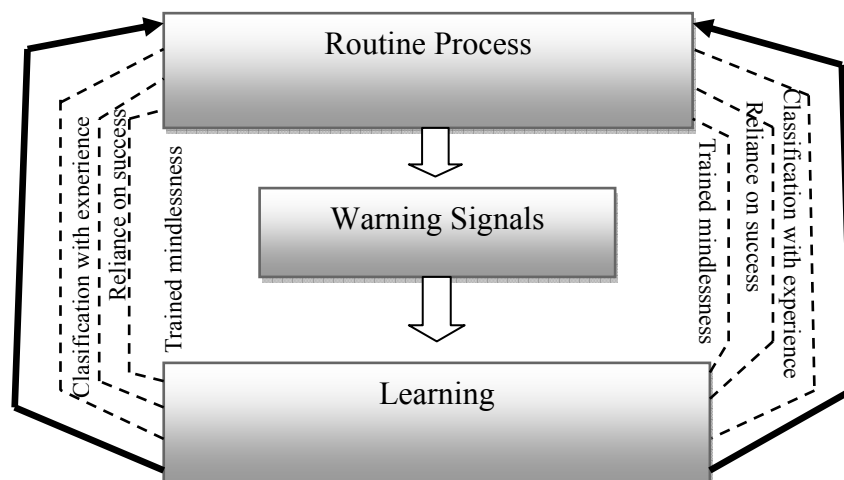

Figure 1: Mindful Learning Model (MLM)
Source: adopted from (Veil, 2011, p. 135).

In MLM, learning is taking place continually in pre-crisis and thus organizations are less likely to experience a crisis, or even failure, but as the barriers always exist, there is always potential to follow a barrier to failure or success (Veil, 2011). So, if an organization wants to exercise mindful learning, it should create a mindful culture and pay attention to information inside and outside of the organization. It is the corporate culture that persuades or dissuades individuals to mindfully deal with crises(Weick & Sutcliffe, 2001), sets limits and forces members to form their behavior according to the values and that tells what's important to pay attention to. By selectively giving priority to the tasks to be mindful of, organizational

members can reexamine elements of the organizing process and better identify early warning signals. These members, however, are empowered enough to manage their setting through mindful learning (Veil, 2011).

Nevertheless, as mentioned before, some barriers hinder organizations and individuals to mindfully learn from warning signals. Veil (2010) argues that our rhetorical realization of the world influence the understanding of barriers which may hinder recognizing early warning signals of potential crises. The rhetorical barriers such as *trained mindlessness*, *reliance on success*, and *classification with experience* have the ability to lead to breakdown or crisis if organizations/individuals loss the opportunity to learn.

Rhetorical Barriers to Learning

Although many barriers have been reckoned for in-depth learning from crises (See for example, Antonacopoulou, 1999; Schilling & Kluge, 2009; Smith & Elliott, 2007; Veil, 2011), the mindful learning model shows three rhetorical barriers which hinder learning. As mentioned earlier, three barriers are illustrated in the model. The first barrier illustrated in the model is *classification with experience*. Inability to use previous experiences to identify the early warning signals makes it difficult to learn in pre-crisis situations.

Burkey (1954) argues that humans only understand reality through the symbols which they can realize. Discussing the importance of symbols in people's life, Burkey (1954), points out that these symbols form our vision to the world. The barrier of classification with experiences denotes that humans look into the world issues using their previous own pattern of experiences whether personal or secondhand (Veil, 2011). But, inquiring this rigid perspective, Haleblian and Finkelstein (1999), say that former experiences are not always relevant to the present one.

Moreover, organizations sometimes need to improve their performance by unlearning former experiences. Sometimes experience is from secondhand sources and in this case, external forces such as media have strong influence to create the rhetorical situations by exaggerating and misinterpreting sensitive issues (Heath and Millar, 2004; Veil, 2011). The ambiguous atmosphere which sometimes media creates in crisis situation can affect the attitude and perception of individuals and frames their understanding of crisis experiences. Veil (2010) argues that although people with similar experiences may have relevancy, there would be difficult to find two people with exactly the same mind-set. One crisis situation will get different responses by a group of people due to their totally different vision to the situation.

People interpret the world's issues based on what Burke (1954) calls terministic screens. Terministic screens direct our attention and alter the picture(s) of "reality" we see much like the different lenses of a camera do. If information does not match our pattern of experiences, it is rarely to be seen by our terministic screens and we will be blind to its effects. "The screens are essentially our classification system for information" (Veil, 2011, p. 124) and all new information will be classified with former experiences. The information which does not match our classification will be disregarded or unnoticed. Moreover, how we react and what we respond to directly related to our classification system.

Reliance on success- some organizations rely on their former success in managing crises and interpret the information based on their previous successful experiences. An organizational culture that concentrates merely on former success can

alter future success by exposing the organization to possible failure (Veil, 2011). Success" stories can create the inability or unwillingness to change" (March & Olsen, 2006; Pfeffer, 1981) and as Nystrom and Starbuck (1984, p. 57) discuss "organizations succumb to crises largely because their top managers, bolstered by recollection of past success, live in worlds circumscribed by their cognitive structure". They moreover believe that top managers misperceive events and justify their organizations' failure.

Antonacopoulou (1999) asserts that if managers are over motivated to act well, then it will hinder their actual learning. However, there are sufficient evidences from literature that organizations that are unable to identify failure and concentrate on former success to justify a possible problem are much more prone to crises rather than those organizations that acknowledge failure and recognize early warning signals through in-depth learning(Antonacopoulou, 1999; Blackman & Henderson, 2004; Fiol & Lyles, 1985; Ritchie et al., 2004; Veil, 2011).

Trained mindlessness-sometimes organizations train their members to ignore warning signals. When managers say "just do your own task" or "get the job done" (Veil, 2010, p. 126), this statements indicate mindlessness. As we discussed earlier, Langer (1989), defines mindlessness as to be incurious to the issues around a situation. Langer (1989) further says "when we are mindless, we are like programmed automatons, treating information in a single-minded and rigid way, as though it were true regardless of the circumstances". This notion says that individuals who are following the routine and do not think out of box, are not attentive to uncertainties. Perrow (2008) argues that when behaving in a mindless manner, organizational members are less attentive to signals, or if they realized, tend to construe such stimuli, not as crises, but as a minor failure.

The concept of "trained incapacity" which suggested by Veblon is manifesting trained mindlessness. The trained incapacity has been defined as "the inability to conceive of, or utilize, new ideas, immobility, then is dysfunctional to innovative or may reduce organizational effectiveness(Dublin, 1970; as cited in Dalton & Todor, 1979, p. 226). Training can potentially hinder our capability to look beyond what we have learnt. Veil (2011) argues that if someone wants to only see what he/she supposes to see, then they are blind to what exists outside their thinking area.

Discussion and Conclusion

Mindful Learning in Tourism Crisis Management

Mindful learning is a neglected area of study in tourism crisis management literature. Research studies suggest that tourism organizations tend to focus more on routines rather than unexpected issues (Blackman & Ritchie, 2008; de Sausmarez, 2004; Ghaderi et al., 2012). Recurrent of many crises in some destinations denotes that tourism organizations have potential to mindlessly ignore the warning signals and then succumb to crises. Confirming this claim, de Sausmarez (2004, p. 158) observed that "few countries appear to make any advance preparations or provision for their tourism sectors in anticipation of a crisis. Instead, they tend to wait until after the event before starting to consider what action to take".

Paraskevas and Altinay (2012) claim although tourism managers admitted that there were enough warning signals prior to a crisis, these signals were neglected or misinterpreted. Other studies, however, (Blackman & Ritchie, 2008; Henderson, 2003) discuss on the reluctance of tourism managers to allocate much resources on

crisis management and preparedness activities. This is what we called single loop learning from tourism crises(Ritchie, 2004). This type of learning focuses on the status quo and does not inquiry the beliefs and assumptions of organization culture.

Questioning single loop learning, Anderson (2006) points out that tourism stakeholders in Australia were satisfied with their responses to the events of 2001, namely, the collapse of the HIH Insurance Company, the World Trade Centre attacks and the demise of Ansett Airlines. They did not feel the need to do anything differently should a similar situation happen again. This rigid perspective to crisis management causes signals which are outside of our scope of attention to be ignored or unnoticed. This is a rhetorical barrier of mindful learning model (reliance of past success) that we discussed in this study.

In order to learn mindfully, this study recommends second order or double-loop learning (Argyris, 1999) of tourism crisis management in which not only tourism stakeholders attempt to remove anomalies, but also question the beliefs and assumptions of the organization culture. Mindful learning assists organization members to think out of the box and pay attention to unexpectedness. Incorporating mindful learning in tourism crisis management helps organizations to acquire appropriate knowledge and information out of their routine activities, recognize likely threats and take into account necessary measures to tackle crises. If the potential risks are identified early and actions are taken in time, then, organizations may think of sustainable development.

In addition, mindful thinking will help organizational members to convert potential threat to opportunity and find benefits inside it. Nevertheless, mindful learning might not completely taken place due to rhetorical barriers such as trained mindless, reliance on success and classification with experience. As an example, Bali security forces failed to foil the second terror plot in 2005 due to their trained mindless that can be found in this message which published by authorities " this is the first and last attack here [Bali]", and has nothing to do with internal conflicts; it is pure international terrorism so they should not worry that it would trigger other conflicts". (Henderson, 2003, p. 50). A Philippine security official has claimed that few months prior to attacks intelligence officials in Southeast Asia had received information that Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) group was organizing a major strike, possibly in the Philippines or Indonesia, but were unable to uncover the plot's details in time to prevent it (Wikipedia, 2012).

While the first Bali bombing in October, 2002 questioned the destinations' safety and security; the second bomb in 2005 revealed the inability of local authorities in detaining the terrorists and securing the area. Nevertheless, security forces refused to accept their inability to bring back the safety to the area.

As Mitroff et al. (1987) note that managers are usually reluctant to reflect their failures because they do not want to "reopen old wounds" or they may do not have the time to think about their previous behaviors. They believe that mindful learning should lead to the new knowledge and necessary changes in organizational culture. Without this change, no lessons learnt, nor management strategies are effective.

Acknowledgment

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