

**Managers Who Thrive:
The Use of Workplace Social Support by
Middle Managers During Hurricane Katrina**

A. Kevin Nourse

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By

A. Kevin Nourse

Abstract

This qualitative study explores how middle managers who thrived during Hurricane Katrina used their workplace social support systems. An emphasis was placed on identifying the sources and types of support received before, during, and after the Katrina crisis.

Significant challenges exist today for organizations on the basis of societal, political, environmental, and technological trends. Among those trends are predictions of greater numbers and intensities of weather-related crises triggered in part by global weather pattern shifts and global warming. These challenges create a compelling need for leaders to effectively plan for and manage crises to assure organizational survival. Middle managers, in particular, play a critical role in terms of planning for and recovering organizational functioning after a crisis. Yet relatively little is known about how they subjectively experience adversity and receive social support in the workplace. This study draws upon three bodies of literature including thriving, social support and crisis management.

The participants in this study were 14 middle managers employed by organizations in the greater New Orleans area impacted in 2005 by Hurricane Katrina. Industries represented include health care, higher education, seaports, and defense contracting. Participants were nominated by a senior leader in their organization based on criteria for thriving. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews about participants' experiences before, during and after the Katrina crisis and the types of social support they received from each of five workplace sources. After identifying two core experiences for each participant, the data were

coded and analyzed to determine the workplace sources and type of received social support. Sixteen themes were identified that explained how participants received support from leaders, peers, subordinates, other internal as well as external supports. Four support patterns were identified based on the most important source of support for the participants. These support source patterns included a peer-focused, leader-focused, subordinate-focused and leader-external focused. Role modeling was identified as a source of received support for some participants as well as the role of work teams in providing social network support. Practical implications of the study findings were identified along with suggestions for future research.

Keywords: Thriving, Middle Management, Social Support, Hurricane Katrina, Crisis Management, Post-Traumatic Growth, and New Orleans

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In reflecting on this journey, I am reminded of my experiences learning to fly trapeze and the importance of knowing there was a net to catch me when I fell. Without a net, it is impossible to take risks to learn new trapeze tricks. Falling is an inherent part of the process. In similar ways, social supports have functioned as my net ready to help me as I faced this challenge. This study was more than just another academic paper. Rather, it was as described in the thriving literature a shattering event that fundamentally fractured my self-identity and some key assumptions about my world and self. In that regard, it was like going to the gym not to build muscle, but rather to break down muscle fiber. With food, rest and hydration, our bodies respond by getting stronger. Similarly, the challenge of this dissertation combined with the right kind of support, enabled me to build scholarly muscle. Through this process, I found my voice no easy task for the youngest of seven siblings. The social supports in my life helped me thrive through this shattering process and need to be acknowledged.

I must first acknowledge the 14 participants in this study who so selflessly shared their stories of loss, hope and thriving. I have been forever changed by the courage each of these individuals demonstrated in facing such overwhelming circumstances. I look at their stories as gifts and sincerely hope that I treated these gifts with the respect and reverence they deserve.

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Chapter One: Introduction

Significant challenges exist today for organizations on the basis of societal, political, environmental, and technological trends. Among those trends are predictions of greater frequency and heightened intensities of weather-related crises triggered in part by global warming (Packard & Reinhardt, 2000). Some climate researchers suggest that Hurricane Katrina in 2005 is an example of such a weather event (Rahmstorf, Mann, Rasmus, Schmidt, & Connolley, 2005). As one of seven major storms during a very busy 2005 hurricane season, it formed in the Atlantic Ocean on August 23, 2005, and quickly became a Category 5 before losing strength and coming ashore in the Gulf region of the USA on August 29 as a Category 3. Even with this reduction in strength, it still triggered catastrophic damage as a result of the storm, the breach of manmade levees and resulting floods, and a subsequent chaotic and inadequate response by local, state and federal governments. Approximately 3 weeks after Katrina struck, Hurricane Rita made landfall west of New Orleans on September 21, 2005, thereby triggering another evacuation of New Orleans. Most tragic is the fact that many scientists predicted that it was simply a matter of time before a storm of this magnitude struck the Gulf coast and New Orleans in particular (Travis, 2005). Given the magnitude of this storm, Hurricane Katrina presents a unique opportunity to study how leaders and organizations react to and recover from crisis.

A number of factors triggered my passion to learn about growth through adversity. Nearly 20 years ago I read Viktor Frankl's (1963) account of his experiences in the concentration camps during the Holocaust. His book inspired me to become more aware of the gift of adversity for triggering growth in myself and others. Several years after reading this book, my mother contracted lung cancer, which ultimately took her life. Her death had a

significant impact on me in terms of shattering old perspectives on my life. Out of my loss came a new vision for my life and career, leading me to matriculate in the Fielding doctoral program and launch my own business. The transformation after my mother's death also led me to become a volunteer for a Washington, DC-based hospice organization to provide direct care to patients. I partnered with 10 patients as part of their care team, listening to their stories on a weekly basis for a period of 5 years. I found myself deeply impacted by a number of my patients who, despite their impending death, continued to learn, grow, and thrive. These experiences also triggered deeper questions for me about how people grow through adversity.

In this study I will explore gaps in the crisis management, thriving, and social support literature by examining the subjective experiences of middle managers that faced significant crises. As a fairly new addition to management theory, crisis management theory has emerged over the past 20 years with a primary focus toward the public relations and technical issues associated with responding to and recovering from crisis (Mitroff & Anagnos, 2001). It is particularly important to understand how managers cope with and respond to crisis since employees look to managers for support during times of crisis (Braverman, 1992). Only recently have researchers begun to use a more psychologically oriented approach to this field, emphasizing the needs and subjective experiences of organizational stakeholders who face crises (Pauchant & Mitroff, 1992; Simola, 2005). One such model integrates psychological, social-political, and technological-structural views of crisis preparation and management (Pearson & Clair, 1998). Despite these calls by researchers to better understand and explore the subjective experiences of organizational employees who face crisis, it is often not reflected in organizational crisis management plans (Doepel, 1991). Middle managers play a

critical role in most organizations for translating strategy into action (Embertson, 2006; Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995) and implementing change (Huy, 2001). Yet crisis management models (Pearson & Clair, 1998) are vague in identifying the role of middle managers, as well as their experiences and needs for social support to effectively cope with crisis.

This study draws upon the theories and frameworks from the thriving literature to examine the experiences of middle managers. Thriving as a form of post-traumatic growth represents a transformational process of growing through adversity (O'Leary, 1998) and differs from resilience, which is based on a premise that an individual returns to a pre-adversity baseline level of functioning (Carver, 1998). Although individuals can thrive without adversity, for purposes of this study the emphasis will be post-traumatic growth triggered by the experience of Hurricane Katrina. Evidence of thriving has been identified as an increase in self-confidence, new skills and competencies, and strengthened relationships with others (Carver, 1998), as well as organizational citizenship behaviors such as supporting the organization's success beyond normal role requirements (Porath, Spreitzer, & Gibson, In press). Research on thriving has historically focused on individuals recovering from personal or medical challenges (McCausland & Pakenham, 2003; Pakenham, Sofronoff, & Samios, 2004; Parappully, Rosenbaum, van den Daele, & Nzewi, 2002; Taylor, 1983) and has only recently begun to broaden its focus to address managers in the organizational context. While a number of thriving models exist (Abraido-Lanza, Guier, & Colon, 1998; O'Leary & Ickovics, 1995; Park, Cohen, & Murch, 1996; R. G. Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004), few have specifically focused on thriving in the workplace context (Spreitzer, Sutcliffe, Dutton, Sonenshein, & Grant, 2005) and none have specifically examined the process of thriving among middle managers. One model was developed that focused on the ability of senior

leaders to bounce back after adversity (Stoner & Gilligan, 2002) , but it has not been applied to middle managers, emphasizes resilience instead of thriving, and is imprecise on the types and sources of social supports that study participants received. Another study (Nishikawa, 2006) examined the internal and external factors that have impacted the ability of managers to thrive but did not examine the experience of thriving through adversity over time and also lacked specificity on the types and sources of social supports in the workplace setting.

Because the social support, thriving, and crisis management literatures have largely evolved independently of one another, this study attempted to better link relevant theories and models from these bodies of work. Social support has been identified as a key factor that promotes coping and thriving in times of adversity (Carver, 1998; Schaefer & Moos, 1992; R. G. Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). Stress researchers (S. Cohen & Wills, 1985; House, 1981) have shown that social support can buffer or moderate stress and help improve health in individuals. There are many types of social support, including emotional, instrumental, informational and appraisal (House, 1981). In addition, social support is categorized as being either perceived or received. Perceived support represents an individual's belief in the availability of support if needed whereas received support refers to actual support behaviors observed by a recipient (Helgeson, 1993). A consensus has emerged among researchers about the importance of perceived support in buffering the effects of stress by impacting how stressors are appraised (Cobb, 1976; S. Cohen & Wills, 1985). As a result, far less research has been conducted on received support until recently when researchers have shown how received support is related to perceived support during crises (Norris & Kaniasty, 1996). Only in the past 10 years have researchers begun to explore social support enactment including specific types, timing and source among middle managers (Lindorff, 2000, 2005;

Nishikawa, 2006). Even fewer studies have specifically focused on social support enactment among managers who thrived when faced with adversity (Nishikawa, 2006). Thus, there is a need to better understand both support sources and received support for thriving managers in the workplace.

Even though I was not personally impacted by the storm and ensuing chaos, I recall watching media reports with horror as the residents of New Orleans and other Gulf communities struggled to survive and to preserve their property. Even more amazing were the stories of heroism and selflessness among rescue workers, resident victims and others who rose above the chaos to help others in the days after the storm and beyond. The storm and subsequent floods made it even more imperative that businesses and other organizations reopen to help restore some sense of normality to an overwhelmingly bleak environment. Even though managers in Gulf coast organizations had every reason to succumb to the chaos and give up, hundreds of them thrived and thereby helped their organizations recover.

Significance

This exploratory study contributes to both the scholarly literature as well as practical application to the workplace. Because the literature on leadership and crisis management has placed less emphasis on the unique perspective of managers, this study extends the literature based on the experiences of managers who thrived in crisis. In addition, the study extends the thriving literature by identifying how received social support links to antecedents of thriving in the workplace for managers. Social support literature was extended by better defining social support enactment, including source and type, among thriving middle managers in an organizational setting. From a practical perspective, several facets of this study are significant. First, the findings may provide valuable insights for practitioners that could

impact the capacity of senior leaders to help lower level managers thrive in adversity as part of crisis management efforts. By understanding the experiences of and factors that promote thriving, organizations can become better equipped to build qualified future leaders for their organizations. The most significant potential impact of this study is helping people and organizations better plan for and respond to organizational adversity in the future by understanding the ways that a group of middle managers use social supports in their process of thriving through the Katrina crisis.

Research Question

The research question is: How did middle managers that thrived during Hurricane Katrina use their workplace social support systems?

Definitions

Key concepts and terms used in this study are defined below.

Adversity is defined as a significant event impacting or threatening the functioning of an organization. This term will be used interchangeably with the term crisis. *Crisis* has been defined by researchers as “a disruption that physically affects a system as a whole and threatens its basic assumptions, its subjective sense of self, its existential core” (Pauchant & Mitroff, 1992, pp., p.12). For purposes of this study, the crisis event will consist of Hurricane Katrina, which struck the Gulf Coast region of the United States in 2005. The Katrina crisis will refer to the events associated with the storm, the breach of the levees and resulting floods, breakdown in civil society with New Orleans, and the subsequent approach of Hurricane Rita 3 weeks after Katrina moved ashore.

Middle manager refers to a currently employed manager at a target organization who is at least one level below the chief executive officer or executive director of the organization and one level above front-line employees. These individuals may be referred to as managers, directors, division heads, or vice presidents.

Resilience refers to the ability of an individual to return to a baseline level of functioning after an adverse event. It consists of an attribute that contributes to an individual's ability to thrive or grow as a result of an adverse situation.

Social support is defined as information that causes individual to believe that he or she is cared for, valued, and belonging to a network of communication and mutual obligation (Cobb, 1976). This study emphasizes work-based sources of support. *Perceived support* consists of the perception of available support for an individual experiencing stress whether or not that person chooses to engage it. *Received support* represents the actual support behaviors an individual under stress receives from another. Social support types include (House, 1981):

- Emotional support in the form of empathy and caring;
- Instrumental support that is manifest in hands-on support for work-related tasks;
- Appraisal support consisting of evaluative or developmental feedback; and
- Informational support consisting of providing information that is relevant for the person under stress that helps him or her cope with the stressor.

Further, social network support consists of a sense of belonging to a group (Cutrona & Suhr, 1992).

Thriving represents a person's ability to function throughout an adverse experience beyond a baseline level or to grow despite exposure to stressful experiences (O'Leary, 1998).