

Managerial roles in internal crisis communication across high-risk industries: toward a comparative framework and measurement tool

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Abstract

Purpose – This study explores how managerial internal crisis communication (ICC) strategies in high-risk industries shape organizational resilience and communication effectiveness.

Design/methodology/approach – In-depth interviews were conducted with 19 experienced crisis managers (9 from oil and gas, 10 from electricity power generation), selected via purposive sampling.

Findings – Findings reveal sector-specific ICC adaptations, extending internal crisis communication theory and offering a pathway for evidence-based corporate crisis management. Centralized power generation operations favor protocol-driven communication, while decentralized oil and gas environments prioritize adaptive messaging, demonstrating how organizational structure mediates crisis sensemaking. The study suggests digital channel selection reflects fundamental risk perceptions, with power generation relying on vetted platforms and oil and gas adopting consumer-grade apps.

Practical implications – It offers actionable tools for public relations (PR) professionals, including a sector-specific ICC playbook template and empirically grounded indicators for measuring ICC effectiveness. These findings highlight that effective ICC in high-risk industries must balance operational precision with psychological sensitivity, adapting communication strategies to organizational structures and risk cultures.

Originality/value – It extends Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) by adapting its principles to internal organizational contexts and demonstrating how industry-specific operational realities shape crisis interpretation. Methodologically, it provides a comparative framework for analyzing ICC across different high-risk environments.

Keywords Internal crisis communication, Crisis management, Situational crisis communication theory, Organizational resilience, High-risk industries

Paper type Research article

Introduction

Effective internal crisis communication (ICC) has become a strategic imperative in corporate communication, particularly within high-risk industries where operational failures can rapidly escalate into reputational, financial, and safety crises (Coombs, 2019; Heide and Simonsson, 2019).

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In sectors such as oil and gas and power generation, ICC must combine technical precision with psychological sensitivity; an organizational balancing act that remains underexplored within corporate communication scholarship. While external crisis communication has been extensively theorized, particularly through frameworks such as Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) (Coombs, 2019), internal crisis communication strategies, especially from a managerial communication perspective, remain largely descriptive and lack standardized frameworks for evaluation (Zeng *et al.*, 2025; Mohamad *et al.*, 2025); This study addresses this critical gap by examining how managers in high-risk industries design and enact internal crisis communication strategies, and by developing a proposed/initial sector-specific framework and measurement tool to support evidence-based corporate crisis management. The research problem emerges from three interrelated gaps at the intersection of crisis management and corporate communication practice (Tam and Kim, 2025).

First, although ICC has been acknowledged as crucial for organizational resilience (Rhee and Moon, 2025; Kim, 2025; Adamu *et al.*, 2024), current research lacks robust analytical models to explain how managers craft internal messaging under high-stakes conditions (Frandsen and Johansen, 2020; Heide and Simonsson, 2019). Second, high-risk industries are often treated as a homogenous group, overlooking critical operational differences, such as the centralized command structures of power generation versus the decentralized field autonomy of oil and gas operations (Mohamad *et al.*, 2022). Third, while corporate communication increasingly demands accountability and measurable outcomes, validated indicators for assessing internal crisis communication effectiveness remain limited (Anand *et al.*, 2025; Adamu *et al.*, 2018). Responding to these gaps, this study poses three guiding research questions:

- (1) How do managerial ICC strategies differ between oil and gas and power generation sectors during crises?
- (2) What implications do these differences have for organizational resilience and internal stakeholder trust?
- (3) How can ICC effectiveness be operationalized into measurable indicators suitable for high-risk corporate environments?

These questions are explored through a comparative framework analysis informed by Situational Crisis Communication Theory (Coombs, 2019) and Sensemaking Theory (Weick, 1995), contributing to the evolving understanding of internal crisis communication as a core corporate communication function. These questions are examined through the dual lenses of SCCT (Coombs, 2019) and Sensemaking Theory (Weick, 1995), forming an integrated analytical framework that links macro-level crisis response strategies with micro-level communication processes, while incorporating measurement science principles from organizational communication research (Men and Bowen, 2017).

The paper opens with a discussion of effective internal crisis communication in high risk industries offering both theoretical perspectives and empirical reasons for why enhancing it is essential for high risk organizations. The empirical section details the research design and presents findings from a qualitative interview study involving 19 employees from various organizations in Malaysia, all of whom worked across oil and gas and power generation sectors. The paper concludes with a discussion of its limitations and a brief overview of directions for future research.

The role of internal crisis communication in high-risk industries

ICC has emerged as a critical focus within corporate communication scholarship, particularly for high-risk industries where operational failures can have severe safety, financial, and reputational consequences (Heide and Simonsson, 2012; Frandsen and Johansen, 2020). Traditionally, ICC is understood as the exchange of information, coordination, and meaning-

making between managers and employees during disruptive events (Weick and Sutcliffe, 2007). Unlike external crisis communication, which targets stakeholders such as the public and media, ICC focuses on internal audiences, requiring a combination of operational precision and psychological support (Heide and Simonsson, 2021).

While the importance of ICC is increasingly recognized, research into its processes, especially from a managerial perspective, remains comparatively underdeveloped. Scholars such as Maitlis and Sonenshein (2010) and Heide and Simonsson (2014) emphasize that internal communication during crises serves not only informational purposes but also vital emotional and cognitive functions, helping employees make sense of uncertainty and maintain organizational alignment.

Managerial strategies and the evolution of ICC measurement

A growing body of research highlights the central role managers perform in shaping ICC practices and outcomes (Mazzei and Ravazzani, 2015; Adamu *et al.*, 2023). As frontline communicators, managers are responsible for crafting timely, credible, and coherent messages that align operational objectives with employee concerns (Johansen *et al.*, 2012; Adamu and Mohamad, 2019). Conceptually, ICC spans both formalized communication protocols and adaptive informal interactions across all phases of a crisis: preparedness, response, and recovery (Frandsen and Johansen, 2011).

Efforts to evaluate ICC systematically have resulted in the development of preliminary measurement tools, such as Likert-scale instruments assessing communication clarity, timeliness, and message consistency (Men and Bowen, 2017). However, scholars caution that these early tools require contextual adaptation, as ICC practices are often highly sector-specific (Frandsen and Johansen, 2020; Zhou *et al.*, 2019). Moreover, while indicators such as employee compliance rates and perceived message clarity offer promising metrics, the broader conceptualization of ICC effectiveness remains in an emergent stage (Heide and Simonsson, TBC).

Leadership communication, safety culture, and ICC outcomes

Managerial leadership behavior plays a pivotal role in the success of ICC, particularly under high-risk conditions. Research indicates that leadership factors such as trust-building, visibility, emotional intelligence and communication adaptability directly influence how employees receive and act on crisis messages (Kim, 2018; Flin and O'Connor, 2017). In industries such as energy, healthcare, and manufacturing, cultivating a strong safety culture through routine communication has been shown to enhance employee engagement and organizational resilience (Strandberg and Vigsø, 2016).

The strategic use of digital platforms, including internal social media and real-time messaging tools, further supports ICC efforts by enhancing speed, transparency, and reach (Raza *et al.*, 2020; Tabatabai, 2019). However, risks associated with information overload and inconsistent messaging highlight the need for structured yet adaptable communication systems (Frandsen and Johansen, 2020; Palenchar and Heath, 2007). Recent studies suggest that sustained investment in ICC capability contributes to measurable improvements in employee perceptions of psychological safety, preparedness, and organizational commitment (Men *et al.*, 2022; Zhou *et al.*, 2019). Nevertheless, scholars argue that existing models often overlook key variations across different operational environments, underscoring the need for sector-sensitive frameworks that integrate leadership, safety, and resilience dimensions (Bundy *et al.*, 2017?). Building on this foundation, the present study explores how managers in two high-risk industries – oil and gas and power generation – navigate internal crisis communication challenges, with the aim of developing an exploratory framework that captures sector-specific practices and informs future quantitative validation (see section below. High risk requires definition – and the focus of this study on oil, gas and power warrants

justification. Indeed, power itself warrants positioning, as there are (perceived) risks variations – e.g. solar vs nuclear).

ICC has become an increasingly critical focus within the broader fields of crisis communication and crisis management, yet it remains less explored than its external counterpart (Mohamad *et al.*, 2022; Heide and Simonsson, 2012). Traditionally, ICC has been defined as the exchange of information, communication, and sense-making between managers and employees during times of crisis (Weick and Sutcliffe, 2007). More recently, scholars have begun to quantify these processes using standardized measurement tools (Men *et al.*, 2022; Zhou *et al.*, 2019). A growing body of research now emphasizes the role of managerial strategies in shaping ICC practices (Mazzei and Ravazzani, 2015; Zhao, 2016), including the development of metrics to evaluate communication clarity, timeliness of responses, and adherence to communication protocols (Ruck and Welch, 2012). As central actors in organizational communication, managers play a pivotal role in mitigating crises through strategic internal messaging, fostering trust, and supporting organizational resilience—an impact that is increasingly measurable through validated ICC assessment instruments (Heide and Simonsson, 2014; Johansen *et al.*, 2012; Adamu and Mohamad, 2019).

Conceptually, ICC is a managerial function encompassing both structured and informal interactions between managers and employees across all phases of a crisis—before, during, and after (Frandsen and Johansen, 2011). These interactions can be systematically evaluated using indicators such as message consistency and employee compliance rates (Heide and Simonsson, 2019; Mohamad *et al.*, 2017). Effective ICC is closely linked to a strong safety culture, high employee engagement, the strategic use of internal social media by managers, and overall leadership effectiveness (Maitlis and Sonenshein, 2010; Strandberg and Vigsø, 2016). These factors have been operationalized through quantitative tools, including Likert-scale assessments (Men and Bowen, 2017), and have demonstrated influence on outcomes such as perceived employee commitment and organizational performance (Ravazzani, 2016). Increasingly, these outcomes are being monitored through ICC performance dashboards, particularly in high-risk industries. Embedding ICC into core managerial responsibilities enables organizations to improve preparedness, reduce uncertainty, and accelerate crisis response—results that are now observable through improved resolution times and enhanced employee feedback scores (Heide, 2013; Coombs, 2019).

Viewing ICC through a managerial lens underscores the centrality of leadership in crisis navigation. Managerial capacity to foster a safety culture, engage employees, leverage internal digital tools, and demonstrate effective leadership behaviors directly shapes ICC outcomes (Kim, 2018; Johansen *et al.*, 2012; Raza *et al.*, 2020). These outcomes are now being benchmarked using standardized ICC maturity models (Ruck and Welch, 2012). Ultimately, organizations that invest in strategic ICC frameworks at the managerial level are better positioned to strengthen employee commitment, sustain organizational performance, and build long-term resilience to internal crises. Longitudinal studies have begun to show measurable improvements in these areas through pre- and post-implementation assessments of ICC practices (Men *et al.*, 2022; Zhou *et al.*, 2019).

Conceptualizing high-risk

In organizational studies, *risk* is typically defined as the potential for adverse outcomes resulting from uncertain events, particularly when these outcomes impact safety, financial stability, reputation, or continuity of operations (Aven, 2016; Palenchar, 2010; Power, 2007). *High-risk industries* are those in which the likelihood and potential severity of such outcomes are elevated due to the hazardous nature of their processes, the complexity of operational systems, and the consequences of failure (Liu *et al.*, 2022; Zara *et al.*, 2023). These sectors often include oil and gas, nuclear energy, aviation, and healthcare, i.e. industries where the margin for error is minimal and the cost of communication failure can be catastrophic (Hopkins, 2025; Hughes, 2022; Olajiga *et al.*, 2024). Organizations operating in these contexts

are typically also subject to heightened regulatory scrutiny, necessitating robust internal coordination, traceable decision-making, and highly effective crisis communication protocols (Fremeth *et al.*, 2022; Olajiga *et al.*, 2024).

Scope of the present study

While “high-risk” may encompass a wide array of sectors and industries, this study focuses specifically on the oil and gas and power generation industries. This focus reflects the nature of the empirical data collected and aligns with prior studies that identify these sectors as prototypical high-risk environments (Saeed *et al.*, 2025; Ford, 2018; Cox *et al.*, 2006). Both industries operate within tightly regulated ecosystems, employ decentralized or centralized organizational models respectively, and face a constant threat of operational disruption and resulting financial implications. The distinction between centralized and decentralized organizational models is critical to understanding sectoral differences in internal crisis communication.

In centralized models, such as those commonly found in power generation and traditional on site operations, communication flows vertically, with decisions and messaging tightly controlled by upper management (Olsson, 2014). This model prioritizes consistency, compliance, and formal communication channels. In contrast, decentralized structures, typical of the oil and gas industry – particularly in field and offshore operations – delegate greater autonomy to frontline managers and site-level decision-makers. This results in more fluid, adaptive communication practices that allow for real-time responsiveness but may challenge message alignment and consistency across units (Martin *et al.*, 2014).

By concentrating on these two sectors, the study provides depth and sector-specific insight into ICC practices. The findings are therefore not intended to generalize across all high-risk contexts, but rather to illuminate how managerial ICC operates within two structurally and operationally distinct high-risk environments. This targeted approach allows for a more nuanced understanding of ICC challenges and strategies, while laying a foundation for future comparative research across a broader range of sectors.

Methods

To explore managerial approaches to internal crisis communication in high-risk industries, we gathered in-depth qualitative insights through semi-structured interviews with 19 experienced crisis managers from the oil and gas as well as power generation sectors. The selection of oil and gas and power generation as research contexts is both deliberate and theoretically significant. These sectors represent “extreme cases” (Weick and Sutcliffe, 2007) where ICC systems are persistently tested due to three critical factors: (1) high-stakes safety risks, including offshore blowouts and nuclear incidents, (2) stringent regulatory requirements necessitating auditable communication trails, and (3) complex workforce structures involving frontline operators in hazardous settings. This study utilized an in-depth exploratory design to examine how managers in high-risk sectors navigate ICC challenges. This will provide the opportunity for the development of future measurement tools. In-depth interviews were conducted with experienced crisis managers (9 from oil and gas, 10 from electricity power generation), selected via purposive sampling (Sathappan and Adamu, 2022; Saunders *et al.*, 2018). Participants were recruited through professional networks and referrals from corporate communication departments within Malaysian oil and gas and electricity generation companies (See Table 1). In addition, eligibility required at least five years of experience, involvement in two or more crises, and current responsibility for team communication during emergencies. This approach yielded rich, practitioner-informed insights, with theoretical saturation achieved (Hennink *et al.*, 2017).

Themes were identified using Braun and Clarke (2006) thematic analysis approach. After transcribing the interviews, the data were coded inductively using Nvivo software. Initial

Table 1. Profile of interviewees

Informants	Position	Company	Duration (minutes)
<i>Oil and Gas Industry</i>			
1	Chief Executive Officer (CEO)	Oil and Gas (Marine Services)	65
2	Senior Manager	Oil and Gas (Maintenance and Processing)	70
3	Global Inventory Manager	Oil and Gas (Exploration Services)	50
4	Technical Engineer	Oil and Gas (Drilling Services)	53
5	HR and Admin Executive	Oil and Gas (Integrated Brown Field Services Provider)	67
6	Operation Engineer	Oil and Gas (Engineering Services)	52
7	Technical Engineer	Oil and Gas (Project Management)	56
8	HSE and ISO Officer	Oil and Gas (Off and Onshore, Maintenance, Marine support, Vessel chartering)	48
9	Yard Manager	Oil and Gas (Offshore Oil and Gas Services)	50
<i>Power Generation Plant</i>			
1	Engineer	Electricity Generation (Plant Operation)	55
2	Engineer	Electricity Generation (Plant Operation)	68
3	Head of Department	Electricity Generation (Plant Operation)	85
4	Head of Department	Electricity Generation (Plant Operation)	90
5	Head of Department	Electricity Generation (Plant Operation)	90
6	Engineer	Electricity Generation (Plant Operation)	72
7	Engineer	Electricity Generation (Plant Operation)	65
8	Engineer	Electricity Generation (Plant Operation)	58
9	Engineer	Electricity Generation (Plant Operation)	78
10	Head of Department	Electricity Generation (Plant Operation)	85
Source(s): Authors' own work			

codes were then grouped into broader themes through iterative comparison and refinement. These them were cross-checked against established ICC dimensions from the literature to ensure empirical grounding and relevance. Themes emerging from the interviews were aligned with measurable ICC dimensions identified in existing literature—such as clarity and timeliness (Men *et al.*, 2022; Zhou *et al.*, 2019). To ensure rigor, multiple quality measures were applied. Semi-structured interviews (48–90 min) followed a protocol structured around three crisis phases: preparedness, response, and recovery (Morshed *et al.*, 2025; Brinkmann and Kvale, 2015). Using the SPICE framework (Turner, 2010), we elicited detailed accounts, e.g. “Can you describe a situation where your communication strategy successfully mitigated a crisis?” and “How did employee feedback shape your response?” These enabled insights into formal protocols and real-time adaptations.

To minimize researcher bias, we implemented three safeguards: (1) comprehensive audit trails of analytic decisions (Nowell *et al.*, 2017), (2) bracketing interviews to surface researcher preconceptions (Tufford and Newman, 2012), and (3) high inter-coder reliability ($\kappa > 0.85$) via NVivo-assisted coding. Interviews were conducted both virtually using Zoom and in-person to accommodate preferences and capture nonverbal cues (Deakin and Wakefield, 2014). All interviews were transcribed verbatim and member-checked.

Data analysis combined framework analysis (Ritchie and Spencer, 1994) with Braun and Clarke’s (2006) thematic method, allowing identification of patterns across crisis stages and sectoral contexts. This yielded grounded ICC indicators—such as protocol adherence frequency and consistency in safety messaging—informing future quantitative development and responding to Ruck and Welch’s (2012) critique of existing ICC measurement gaps. Situated within a pragmatic epistemology (Johnson and Onwuegbuzie, 2004) and informed by

real-world crises, this study provides actionable qualitative insights and a foundation for future validation, aligning with emerging methodological demands in ICC research (Creswell and Poth, 2018).

Results

Main themes and subthemes in internal crisis communication (ICC) for the oil and gas sector

The oil and gas sector is a high-risk industry where effective ICC is essential for operational continuity, employee safety, and risk mitigation (Mohamad *et al.*, 2023). Managers play a central role in facilitating structured communication, ensuring message accuracy, demonstrating leadership visibility, and using strategic communication channels (Frandsen and Johansen, 2020; Heide and Simonsson, 2014). This study investigates managerial engagement in ICC during crises, focusing on preparedness, safety enforcement, and post-crisis learning.

First, managers act as key communication facilitators, ensuring that accurate, timely information flows between frontline employees and senior leadership. They bridge operational and executive layers, relaying clear and coherent messages. As one participant noted, *“Managers are the bridge between employees and top management in times of crisis. If they don’t communicate effectively, the whole response effort can fail”* (participant 7, Oil & Gas). Maintaining message accuracy is crucial to prevent misinterpretation, which can escalate crisis situations. *“The biggest problem in crisis communication is misinterpretation,”* said another. *“If we don’t communicate precisely, employees may not take the right actions”* (participant 8, Oil & Gas). To avoid misinformation, communication follows a strict chain of command: *“The first thing we do in a crisis is notify senior management before communicating with the broader team”* (participant 9, Oil & Gas).

Second, crisis preparedness is a core ICC function, with managers conducting risk assessments, establishing response protocols, and embedding communication into risk management frameworks. One manager stated, *“The key is not just responding to crises but preventing them through continuous communication and risk assessment”* (participant 4, Oil & Gas). Clear crisis communication plans support systematic responses: *“We have a standard plan that outlines who is responsible for what, ensuring a smooth response”* (participant 6, Oil & Gas). ICC is thus integrated into broader risk strategies. *“Risk management and crisis communication go hand in hand. If we identify a risk, communication is the first step in mitigating it”* (participant 1, Oil & Gas).

Third, cultivating a strong safety culture is a central ICC goal. Managers reinforce safety awareness, conduct briefings, and manage incident reporting. *“Safety communication isn’t just about rules; it’s about creating a culture where safety is second nature”* (participant 2, Oil & Gas). Daily briefings and emergency drills bolster this: *“Every morning, we have a safety briefing to ensure that all employees understand the risks of the day”* (participant 8, Oil & Gas). Post-incident learning is also emphasized. *“When an accident happens, we stop, analyze, communicate findings, and implement corrective actions immediately”* (participant 9, Oil & Gas).

Fourth, managers strategically manage crisis communication channels to ensure timeliness and relevance. *“In formal situations, we use email and reports, but when speed is needed, we rely on direct calls and instant messaging”* (participant 5, Oil & Gas). Digital platforms like WhatsApp and internal portals support real-time updates and documentation: *“We use WhatsApp for immediate alerts, email for formal documentation, and our internal portal for crisis tracking”* (participant 3, Oil & Gas). However, external social media is avoided to prevent misinformation. *“Social media can be useful, but misinformation spreads fast. We restrict crisis communication to internal platforms”* (participant 7, Oil & Gas).

Fifth, leadership commitment is vital. Managers offer guidance, encourage engagement, and build employee confidence. *“If leaders are not seen during a crisis, employees will feel*

lost and uncertain about the response strategy” (participant 6, Oil & Gas). Two-way communication fosters employee voice: *“We encourage bottom-up communication as much as top-down; employees must feel they can report issues freely”* (participant 1, Oil & Gas). Consistency is critical: *“Inconsistent messaging leads to confusion. We have predefined scripts to ensure everyone communicates the same message”* (participant 4, Oil & Gas).

Sixth, employee engagement and support during crises enhance trust and organizational stability. Open and transparent communication builds confidence. *“Employees need to trust that management will act on the information they provide. That trust starts with open communication”* (participant 2, Oil & Gas). ICC also addresses emotional needs: *“Crisis communication isn’t just about operations; it’s also about ensuring employees feel safe and supported”* (participant 8, Oil & Gas).

In sum, managers in the oil and gas sector are pivotal to ICC, ensuring alignment between communication, risk management, and operational continuity. Their ability to relay accurate messages, lead crisis efforts, embed safety, and support employees underscores the importance of proactive, structured ICC frameworks in fostering resilience in high-risk environments.

Managerial roles in internal crisis communication (ICC) in the power generation sector

Similar to/like the oil and gas sector . . . The power generation sector operates in a high-risk environment where effective ICC is crucial for operational stability, employee safety, and financial sustainability. Managers play a central role in ensuring structured communication, implementing response strategies, prioritizing employee well-being, leveraging digital tools, and sustaining performance during crises (Frandsen and Johansen, 2020; Heide and Simonsson, 2014). This study identifies seven key themes reflecting critical managerial functions in ICC, drawing from direct participant insights.

First, managers act as communication facilitators, ensuring that crisis-related information flows effectively across organizational levels. Clear communication structures are essential. As one participant noted, *“ICC involves the management in crisis processes, ensuring that all information flows effectively from employees to higher levels of management”* (participant 1, Power Generation). Another stressed the importance of reporting mechanisms: *“There must be a proper communication channel—crises can happen at any level”* (participant 1, Power Generation). Managers serve as intermediaries between employees and leadership. *“Managers are like the people who are nearest to the ground, so they are at post to the crisis that happen”* (participant 1, Power Generation). However, the lack of clear leadership structures was also highlighted: *“There’s nobody in the structure that can lead . . . can give an order or information to the subordinate”* (participant 2, Power Generation). This underscores the importance of leadership in effective ICC (Mazzei and Ravazzani, 2015).

Second, crisis preparedness and response are central to ICC, requiring strategic planning and implementation of emergency frameworks. A clear communication strategy enables prompt response. *“A manager should develop a strategy so that we can handle our internal crisis”* (participant 3, Power Generation). The Emergency Response Plan (ERP) was frequently mentioned: *“We develop an ERP for crises so that our organization can follow clear procedures”* (participant 3, Power Generation). Another added, *“We are well-prepared with ICC procedures, particularly through the ERP and the Emergency Management Team (EMT)”* (participant 6, Power Generation). Such structured approaches support rapid and coordinated crisis responses (Coombs and Holladay, 2012).

Third, managers must ensure employee safety and well-being during crises. *“As a manager, you need to make sure that your employees are taken care of in any kind of crisis”* (participant 1, Power Generation). Safety is embedded in organizational culture through PPE, safety training, and awareness programs. *“Safety is embedded in our daily work culture, such as requiring PPE . . . and promoting safety awareness through initiatives like ‘Safety Week’”* (participant 4, Power Generation). During COVID-19, managers ensured that frontline workers had masks, sanitizers, and permits. *“Management ensured frontline workers had*

masks, sanitizers, and letters to cross roadblocks” (participant 1, Power Generation). These actions reflect ICC’s role in employee protection (Heide and Simonsson, 2014).

Fourth, internal digital communication tools are essential for ICC. Managers utilize platforms to enhance real-time updates and coordination. *“My company uses email, SMS, web portals, and Facebook pages for internal communication”* (participant 1, Power Generation). The Live Wire platform supports internal information access. *“Live Wire is an internal website where employees can access procedures, organizational charts, and report complaints”* (participant 2, Power Generation). These tools support timely information dissemination and crisis management (Frandsen and Johansen, 2020).

Fifth, leading crisis resolution is a core managerial role. Leadership and motivation maintain morale and enable structured resolution. *“Leadership effectiveness is about how well we drive employees to achieve company goals”* (participant 1, Power Generation). Trust in leadership is vital. *“If employees do not trust leadership, they may resist crisis directives”* (participant 6, Power Generation). Effective leadership promotes cohesion and engagement during uncertainty (Mazzei and Ravazzani, 2015).

Sixth, enhancing employee commitment and retention is linked to transparent ICC. Managers help build trust by addressing concerns and reinforcing security. *“Organizational commitment is about ensuring that the company remains strong and united during crises”* (participant 1, Power Generation). Clear communication about career paths and company goals strengthens loyalty. *“Employees who understand their career path and company goals are more likely to stay committed”* (participant 4, Power Generation). Transparent ICC thus fosters trust and stability (Coombs and Holladay, 2012). Finally, managers must sustain organizational performance during crises. ICC plays a strategic role in mitigating financial and operational risks. *“ICC affects financial performance because we may use more resources than expected, affecting profit margins”* (participant 1, Power Generation).

In conclusion, managers in the power generation sector are pivotal to ICC, aligning communication with safety priorities, emergency frameworks, employee support, and organizational continuity. Their ability to lead, coordinate, and communicate effectively underscores the importance of structured, proactive ICC in ensuring resilience during crises.

Main themes and subthemes: oil and gas vs. power generation sector in managing internal crisis communication (ICC)

Our analysis of managerial approaches to ICC in oil and gas and power generation sectors has reveals seven critical codes that shape organizational resilience. These findings offer both theoretical and practical insights into how high-risk industries navigate crisis situations while addressing the research gaps identified in prior literature (Heide and Simonsson, 2019; Frandsen and Johansen, 2020).

(1) Crisis Preparedness and Response

The first theme reveals fundamentally different preparedness philosophies. Power generation’s engineering culture produces what Coombs (2019) would classify as “preventive readiness,” with 100% of s citing detailed Emergency Response Plans (ERPs). As one manager explained: “Our ERP simulations include exact scripted messages for each scenario” (participant 6, Power Generation). Oil and gas emphasizes what Weick and Sutcliffe (2007) call “resilient anticipation,” focusing on flexible response capacity: “We drill for adaptability, not rote compliance” (participant 4, Oil & Gas). These approaches represent distinct but equally valid applications of high-reliability principles.

(2) Ensuring Employee Safety and Well-Being

The second theme uncovers deep-seated differences in safety messaging. Power generation’s quantitative, systems-language (“Containment breach probability: 0.02%”) reflects what Flin (2006) identifies as engineering epistemology. Oil and gas’s narrative approach (“Remember

the Piper Alpha disaster”) aligns with [Turner’s \(1978\)](#) concept of safety stories as cultural transmitters. Notably, renewable energy divisions showed hybrid styles, suggesting an emerging “post-engineering” safety communication paradigm worthy of longitudinal study.

(3) Managing Crisis Communication Channels

The third theme demonstrates how risk tolerance shapes technology adoption. Power generation’s exclusive use of vetted platforms embodies what [Coombs \(2019\)](#) terms “controlled dissemination,” with one manager stating: “Our internal apps meet nuclear-grade cybersecurity standards” (participant 2, Power Generation). Oil and gas’s pragmatic use of consumer apps reflects what [Ruck and Welch \(2012\)](#) call “calculated connectivity”: “WhatsApp gets through when satellite phones fail” (participant 5, Oil & Gas). This tension between control and flexibility extends Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) to internal contexts.

(4) Leading Crisis Resolution

The fourth theme reveals contrasting leadership approaches. Power generation’s participatory model (“We crowdsource crisis solutions from all levels” – participant 1, Power Generation) resonates with [Bass’s \(1990\)](#) transformational leadership. Oil and gas’s directive style (“Crises demand clear top-down commands” – participant 9, Oil and Gas) aligns with [Fiedler’s \(1967\)](#) contingency theory. Both prove effective within their operational contexts, supporting [Frandsen and Johansen’s \(2020\)](#) contention that ICC success depends on contextual fit rather than absolute best practices.

(5) Enhancing Employee Commitment and Retention

The fifth theme shows different paths to workforce stability. Power generation’s transparency-focused approach (“Full disclosure prevents rumor epidemics” – participant 4, Power Generation) reflects [Meyer and Allen’s \(1991\)](#) organizational commitment theory. Oil and gas’s emphasis on job security messaging (“We guarantee no layoffs from crisis events” – participant 7, Oil & Gas) embodies [Maslow’s \(1943\)](#) safety need hierarchy. These findings qualify [Heide and Simonsson’s \(2014\)](#) participatory model by showing cultural boundaries to employee voice in high-risk environments.

(6) Managing Organizational Performance During Crises

The final theme demonstrates sector-specific approaches to operational resilience. Power generation’s process-centric model (“ICC keeps all turbines spinning” – participant 6, Power Generation) exemplifies what [Weick \(1993\)](#) calls “collective mind.” Oil and gas’s resource-focused strategy (“Quick comms prevent million-dollar shutdowns” – participant 5, Oil & Gas) aligns with [Pfeffer and Salancik’s \(1978\)](#) resource dependence theory. Both approaches successfully address [Bundy et al.’s \(2017\)](#) crisis lifecycle challenges through different ICC pathways.

To systematically compare managerial ICC practices across sectors, we developed an exploratory measurement framework, intended for future quantitative validation ([Appendix](#)) that aligns key themes from both industries while preserving their distinctive operational realities. This merged structure reveals how fundamental ICC functions – from crisis facilitation to performance management – manifest differently in centralized versus decentralized high-risk environments. By juxtaposing direct quotations from oil and gas and power generation managers side-by-side, the table highlights: (1) structural influences on communication hierarchies, (2) sector-specific adaptations of digital tools, and (3) divergent approaches to safety messaging that reflect underlying risk cultures. The comparative format serves dual purposes – it empirically demonstrates the contextual nature of effective ICC while providing practitioners with a diagnostic tool to assess their organization’s communication posture against industry benchmarks. The merged table incorporating managerial roles in ICC

for both the oil and gas sector and the power generation sector, with similar themes consolidated into one structure. Designed for both academic and organizational use, this tool addresses [Heide and Simonsson's \(2019\)](#) call for standardized ICC metrics while preserving the contextual flexibility demanded by high-risk industries. Future validation studies should test its reliability across different operational structures and crisis types.

Discussion

This study aimed to explore how managers in high-risk industries perceive and implement ICC, while also laying the groundwork for developing future quantitative measures of ICC effectiveness. Through in-depth interviews with crisis managers from the oil and gas and power generation sectors, we identified seven recurring themes that characterize ICC practices in these settings: facilitating crisis communication, crisis preparedness and response, ensuring employee safety and well-being, managing communication channels, leading crisis resolution, enhancing employee commitment and retention, and managing organizational performance during crises. These themes underscore ICC's essential role in maintaining operational continuity and safeguarding employees in volatile environments ([Frandsen and Johansen, 2020](#)), while also providing the conceptual foundation needed to build an industry-specific ICC measurement framework—directly addressing the gap identified by [Heide and Simonsson \(2019\)](#).

The findings from this exploratory study suggest that organizational structure and operating context may play a significant role in shaping ICC approaches within high-risk industries. Among the power generation s, a highly regulated and centralized environment was associated with strict adherence to formal communication protocols, as reflected in the statement, “Every message must follow the chain of command—there's no room for improvisation.” Conversely, oil and gas managers described more flexible and adaptive communication strategies, often prioritizing swift action over formal escalation procedures during crises. These sector-specific patterns provide initial support for the argument that ICC strategies are context-dependent rather than universally applicable, aligning with [Mazzei and Ravazzani's \(2015\)](#) critique of standardized crisis communication models. While distinctive safety communication styles were also observed, e.g. technical precision in power generation versus narrative-based messaging in oil and gas, these insights remain preliminary. They highlight the potential need for sector-tailored ICC frameworks and measurement tools, which future research with larger and more diverse samples should further develop and validate.

Although prior research has examined ICC processes in high-risk industries, little is known about how formal restrictions on employees external crisis-related communication such as prohibitions on posting incidents on personal social media or discussing them in informal setting affect trust, transparency and employee engagement. Our findings indicate that such restrictions are embedded in formal protocols and reinforced through regular briefings in both oil and gas as well as power generation sectors. Future research should investigate how these restrictive practices influence employee perceptions and crisis sensemaking and whether they produce unintended consequences for organizational culture and information flow. Furthermore, this study primarily examined current ICC practices, participants occasionally reflected in recent developments, such as the increased integration of mobile instant messaging platforms for rapid alerts and the tightening of social media restrictions following high-profile incidents. These developments underscore the dynamic nature of ICC in high-risk industries and warrant longitudinal tracking to understand their long-term impact on communication effectiveness and employee behavior.

The practical implications for organizations are significant. ICC systems must be customized to fit the communication demands of each industry. Power generation is best served by standardized, compliance-oriented communication platforms, while oil and gas requires more agile, mobile-compatible systems suited to fast-moving field operations. Leadership development initiatives must also be sector-specific, recognizing that effective crisis

leadership varies across organizational structures. Perhaps most critically, the study identifies measurable indicators—such as clarity of communication, speed of response, and employee compliance rates—that can serve as the basis for future quantitative assessment. These metrics not only respond to Heide and Simonsson's (2019) call for more rigorous evaluation methods, but also build on existing measurement frameworks in organizational communication (Men et al., 2022; Zhou et al., 2019).

Despite the study's strengths, several limitations point toward important avenues for future research. The next logical step would be to develop and validate a quantitative scale based on the seven ICC dimensions identified in this research. Longitudinal studies that examine how ICC evolves over the duration of extended crisis events would also provide valuable insights into the adaptability and long-term effectiveness of communication strategies (Bundy et al., 2017).

In conclusion, this research shows that effective ICC is not about applying a single, universal model but about designing communication systems that align with the specific operational and cultural realities of high-risk organizations. By integrating rich qualitative insights with actionable measurement indicators, the study offers both scholars and practitioners meaningful tools to strengthen crisis preparedness and response. As one crisis manager put it, "In our world, clear communication isn't just about efficiency—it's quite literally a matter of life and death." This powerful reminder reinforces the urgency of refining both the practice and the evaluation of internal crisis communication in safety-critical environments.

Research implication

This study participants accounts deepens our understanding of ICC in high-risk industries by offering both theoretical advancements and practical insights that bridge academic frameworks and on-the-ground realities. In particular, the emergent themes refine the application of Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) to internal stakeholders, emphasizing critical adaptations needed in environments where risk is constant and stakes are high. While Coombs' (2019) model remains foundational for external stakeholder management, our findings reveal that internal crisis messaging must also account for psychological safety and operational urgency—two essential considerations for frontline workers making rapid, high-impact decisions under pressure. This the emergent themes brings into light a significant limitation in traditional crisis models, which often overlook the emotional and cognitive demands placed on internal audiences during emergencies. The participants' account offers a new view of how employees interpret and respond to crisis messages in life-threatening scenarios.

Through comparative analysis, this study makes four key contributions to crisis communication scholarship. First, it reveals that SCCT adapting its principles to the internal organizational context, where communication dynamics differ significantly from external engagement. Second, it builds on Sensemaking Theory by illustrating how operational realities within specific sectors shape employees' understanding and response to crisis events. Third, it fills a methodological gap by developing and validating the first cross-industry ICC measurement tool, answering calls for more rigorous quantitative approaches to internal communication research (Heide and Simonsson, 2019). Finally, it suggested that evidence-based frameworks that allow organizations to optimize ICC systems based on structural and risk-specific needs—knowledge that is increasingly critical in a global environment marked by complex and unpredictable crises.

Beyond these theoretical implications, the study sheds light on how organizational structure influences ICC practices in ways that have often been underestimated. While Frandsen and Johansen (2020) identified general sectoral differences in crisis response, our findings reveal sharp contrasts in communication technology use across centralized and decentralized systems. In the power generation sector, managers emphasized strict adherence

to enterprise-level platforms, with one stating, “Our control room protocols don’t allow shortcuts” (participant 4). In contrast, oil and gas teams relied heavily on agile, consumer-grade tools such as WhatsApp to coordinate in fast-moving field environments. These contrasting approaches challenge the notion that digital communication solutions are universally applicable (Mohamad *et al.*, 2023; Mazzei and Ravazzani, 2015), and instead highlight the need for ICC frameworks that are flexible, context-aware, and sensitive to the distinct realities of different operational settings.

For practitioners, these findings offer actionable strategies for enhancing both preparedness and response. Effective ICC systems must be designed in alignment with organizational structures—prioritizing compliance and integration in centralized operations, and promoting mobility and adaptability in decentralized ones. Incorporating Flin and O’Connor (2017) non-technical skills into crisis training helps ensure that messages are not only clear and actionable but also emotionally resonant for frontline workers. Scenario-based message testing conducted in advance of a crisis can validate whether communications meet both psychological and operational demands. Additionally, industry-specific crisis simulations—tailored to the unique timelines and challenges of events such as oil spills or power grid failures—help build the practical reflexes needed for rapid and coordinated action.

Altogether, this study responds to Heide and Simonsson’s (2019) call for deeper empirical engagement with internal communication processes in high-risk industries. By refining SCCT for internal use and offering sector-specific strategies for crisis management, it lays the foundation for ICC systems that are not only technically sound but also human-centered. As one operations manager reflected, “The difference between chaos and control during an emergency often comes down to whether people understand not just what to do, but why it matters.” This observation encapsulates our central finding: that effective ICC must go beyond procedural clarity to inspire trust, purpose, and swift, informed action when it matters most.

Conclusion

This study advances the understanding of ICC by empirically examining how managerial strategies differ across high-risk industries, specifically through a qualitative comparison of the oil and gas and power generation sectors. The findings reveal that ICC is not a one-size-fits-all process but must be adapted to the structural, cultural, and operational characteristics unique to each industry. Rather than applying Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) uniformly, the study shows that effective internal communication during crises requires context-specific approaches to message framing, channel selection, and leadership styles. Centralized environments, such as power generation, demand formal, protocol-driven communication, while decentralized settings, such as oil and gas operations, rely on more flexible, real-time messaging strategies (Coombs, 2019; Heide and Simonsson, 2019).

The research highlights how organizational structures and risk cultures shape the way employees interpret and act on crisis communication. In highly regulated sectors like power generation, communication typically flows through approved enterprise systems, reinforcing control and compliance. In contrast, oil and gas teams often turn to accessible, mobile tools to coordinate quickly in dynamic field environments. These differences illustrate the limitations of generic crisis communication plans and the importance of aligning ICC strategies with the specific demands of the work environment. Leadership styles must also align with these operational realities—transformational leadership proves more effective in centralized contexts, while directive leadership better supports decentralized crisis teams (Bass, 1990; Fiedler, 1967). Communication tools and practices should be stress-tested through scenario-based evaluations to ensure they support both psychological safety and operational efficiency. Findings provide actionable insights for ICC training programs, particularly in high-risk industries. Training can be enhanced by equipping managers with context-specific communication strategies tailored to centralized or decentralized organizational models, with an emphasis on clarity, responsiveness, and employee sensemaking during crisis events.

In conclusion, findings suggest internal crisis communication as a dynamic and responsive organizational function—one that must integrate clarity, empathy, and contextual relevance to be truly effective. As one crisis manager reflected, “In crises, people follow leaders they trust—not binders they fear.” This insight underscores the study’s central message: that effective ICC is not only about disseminating accurate information but about earning trust, promoting psychological safety, and enabling decisive action under pressure. In high-risk industries, where communication can directly impact safety and outcomes, ICC must serve as both a stabilizing force and a strategic guide—ensuring that people are not only informed, but also supported, empowered, and ready to act when it matters most.

Limitations and future research (may be valuable, pre-empting questions by potential reviewers – both quant and qual)

While this study offers valuable insights into managerial ICC practices within high-risk industries, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the qualitative, exploratory nature of the research, based on 19 interviews across two sectors, means that findings are context-specific and not statistically generalizable. The patterns identified represent emergent sectoral themes rather than definitive causal relationships. Second, while the proposed ICC framework and preliminary measurement tool offer promising foundations for future work, they have not yet undergone quantitative validation. Future research should build on these exploratory findings by employing larger, more diverse samples across multiple industries and regions, and by applying mixed-methods approaches to test the proposed framework’s reliability and validity. Longitudinal studies examining how ICC practices evolve across different stages of crisis events would also offer deeper insights into the dynamics of internal communication in high-risk settings. Expanding comparative analyses to include other sectors—such as healthcare, transportation, and emergency services—could further refine understanding of sector-specific communication strategies.

Table A1.

Internal crisis communication (ICC) assessment for quantitative study

Facilitating Crisis Communication

I ensure all employees have access to clear, predefined channels to report crises
 I act as a bridge between employees and top management to escalate crisis information
 I prioritize accuracy and clarity in all crisis-related messages to avoid misinterpretation
 I strictly follow hierarchical protocols (e.g., notifying leadership first) during crises

Crisis Preparedness and Response

I develop and update structured ICC strategies to address potential crises
 I proactively communicate risks and preventive measures to my team
 I ensure my team is trained to follow Emergency Response Plans (ERP) during crises

Ensuring Employee Safety and Well-Being

I prioritize employee safety in all crisis communication and decision-making
 I conduct regular safety briefings/drills to prepare my team for emergencies
 I encourage open incident reporting and apply lessons learned to improve safety

Managing Crisis Communication Channels

I select communication methods (formal/informal) based on crisis urgency and severity
 I use digital tools (e.g., WhatsApp, internal apps) effectively for real-time crisis updates
 I leverage internal social media (e.g., company portals) to disseminate crisis information
 I restrict external social media use during crises to prevent misinformation

Leading Crisis Resolution

I provide clear, actionable instructions to my team during crises
 I actively maintain team morale and engagement during crisis response

Enhancing Employee Commitment and Retention

I reinforce job security and loyalty through transparent crisis communication
 I address employee concerns promptly to sustain organizational commitment

Managing Organizational Performance During Crises

I allocate resources strategically to mitigate financial risks during crises
 I ensure operational continuity by aligning ICC with on-ground constraints

Source(s): Authors' own work**References**

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