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| RESEARCH ARTICLE

Unravelling the Work Stories of Incident Commanders in Disaster and Risk Reduction Management

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| ABSTRACT
This study explored the lived experiences of incident commanders in implementing the incident management system during disasters. By using descriptive-phenomenological design, 10 informants were selected using purposive sampling meeting the inclusion criteria. One-on-one interview was conducted and the qualitative data with use of Colaizzi's method generated 8 emergent themes: Knowledge and Leadership Skills Lead to Success, Planning and Supporting Well is Winning Half the Battle, Skill Personnel Inventory Leads to Efficient Services, Interpersonal Skills Radiate Systematic Procedures, Quality Service Equates to Self-Satisfaction, Capacitating Personnel and Partners Through Training and Involvement, Amplifying Services through Adequate Resources, and Bridging Individual Differences Through Professional Development. As highlighted, the effectiveness of disaster management is fundamentally dependent on the competence and leadership of incident commanders operating within a well-established Incident Management System (IMS). Beyond technical knowledge and operational expertise, successful incident management requires transformational leadership, strategic decision-making, effective communication, inter-agency coordination, and organizational resilience. Competent incident commanders serve as the cornerstone of effective disaster governance. Their leadership not only determines operational success during emergencies but also contributes to reducing disaster risks, protecting lives and property, and strengthening community resilience. Future research should continue to investigate the competencies, leadership behaviors, and organizational factors that influence incident commander performance across diverse disaster contexts. Such evidence can inform the development of evidence-based policies, competency frameworks, and training programs that further enhance disaster preparedness and response capabilities in increasingly complex and uncertain environments.

| KEYWORDS

Incident management system, lived experience, descriptive phenomenology, Philippines, Cebu

| ARTICLE INFORMATION

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1. Introduction

Disasters are severe disruptions to all aspects of the operation within and outside a certain community. The effects of disaster can be irreversible. In absence of risk management, losses of lives and properties can severely happen. Disasters may occur at any time and have been increasing in frequency. In 2021, approximately 10,000 fatalities were reported from 401 natural disasters worldwide, resulting in total global economic losses of about 343 billion U.S. dollars (Jaganmohan, 2022).

In the Philippines, 15 individuals were killed when a 6.9-magnitude earthquake (Joseph, 2013), 18 individuals were reported dead in a massive landslide (Miasco & Capistrano, 2018) and several residents experienced shortages of water and gasoline, and power outages in super typhoon Odette (Inso, 2022). Located along the typhoon belt in the Pacific, the Philippines is affected by an average of 20 typhoons per year, five of which are destructive, and several earthquakes (Asian Disaster Reduction Center, 2022).

To reduce the loss of life and property and environmental harm caused by disasters, an incident management system (IMS) was created to provide a systematic, proactive approach that guides agencies at all levels in preventing, protecting against, responding to, recovering from, and mitigating the effects of incidents or disasters (Federal Emergency Management Agency, 2017). The incident management system has been adopted worldwide since 2003. However, in the Philippines, IMS was implemented only in 2012. As reported, IMS of the Philippines is facing three major issues: harmonization with the national disaster response plan; the need to improve the understanding of the IMS among the local government officers; and strengthening the disaster response managed by the objectives and timeframes (Ohara & Sawano, 2015).

In the literature, several quantitative studies have been conducted. A study focused on mobile development application designed for incident and notification (Fabito et al., 2016), a collaborative and privacy-preserving critical incident management system aimed at improving the efficiency and security of emergency response operations (Qureshi et al., 2021), the reliability and effectiveness of the IMS through an assessment of its application in disaster response operations (Miranda, 2020), the application of the IMS as a framework for disaster preparedness within emergency department settings (Farcas et al., 2021), the incident management response of emergency departments (Haesendonck et al., 2021), a mobile disaster utility and incident report management system designed to improve disaster response and incident reporting processes (Gonzales et al., 2021), and the benefits, barriers, and limitations associated with the use of the IMS in emergency management (Shooshtari et al., 2017). However, despite the studies cited above, there is still lack of qualitative research exploring the lived experiences of incident commanders in using incident management systems during disasters. A qualitative approach to this topic could yield richer, more in-depth insights that reflect real-world perspectives and challenges. In turn, this may enhance understanding and broaden existing knowledge on the practical application of incident management systems in disaster settings.

In this paper, the incident management system (IMS) was investigated through accounts of incident commanders lived experiences during disasters. This study analyzed the lived experiences of incident commanders by interpreting and understanding their narratives within the incident management system during disasters. Thus, this study has provided relevant qualitative data to inform improvements to the incident management system by reviewing its mechanisms based on the lived experiences of the incident command system commanders.

2. Methodology

By using a descriptive phenomenological design developed by Edmund Husserl, this study explored the lived experiences of incident commanders in implementing the incident management system during disasters. Phenomenological research was used to identify the underlying structure of shared essences of social phenomena (Worthington, 2013). This design emphasizes describing the lived experience of the participants as they were perceived, without imposing external assumptions. this study employed descriptive phenomenology, following Husserl. The researcher follows the four (4) steps in descriptive phenomenological Eidetic design: bracketing, intuiting, analyzing, and describing (Peres, 2017).

This study was conducted in the Local Government Units (LGUs) in the Philippines. These LGUs have an existing incident management system. There were 10 informants selected using purposive sampling with these inclusion criteria: had three (3) years' experience in responding to any disasters; had attended training and seminars related to disaster risk management conducted either locally or nationally; and were above 21 years old.

By using a semi-structured guided question, a one-on-one interview was conducted to the qualified 10 informants. Prior to data collection, the researcher has secured a university ethics clearance to conduct the study. Before the interview, an informed consent form was given to the informants. Also, the informants were notified that the interview was recorded. The interview was approximately 45-60 minutes per informant. After the interview, informants were notified further that confidentiality of the data and their identity were observed as outlined in ethical research practices.

The qualitative data was treated using the Colaizzi's method following the six steps: familiarization; identifying significant statements; formulating meanings; clustering themes; developing an exhaustive description; and seeking verification of the fundamental structure (Morrow et al., 2015). This method is widely recognized and widely accepted as a rigorous approach to qualitative data analysis because it offers a clear and systematic procedure for exploring the lived experience of the informants.

3. Results

By using Collaizi's method, there were eight generated themes that captured the lived experiences of the incident commanders using incident management system.

3.1 Knowledge and Leadership Skills Lead to Success

Knowledge and leadership skills are vital to implementing the incident command system, as experienced by the incident commander. In the context of the study, knowledge and leadership are among the qualities of an incident commander, and experience is the primary source of innovation in current incident command system practices. Lastly, the incident commander needs experience-based knowledge. With precise knowledge of the application, all affected individuals will be saved. This indicates that they are performing well and adhering to appropriate procedures. As shared by informant 1,

> *« the team members were not injured; they were extremely fortunate because we managed the typhoon effectively, and before the typhoon struck, all residents had already been evacuated to a safe place. We were able to perform and manage a force evacuation for all the constituents. «*

3.2 Planning and Supporting Well is Winning Half the Battle

Planning and support are both crucial in disaster management, as the informant noted. In this context, the informant reported that proper planning and operations were implemented to ensure high-quality service to the community during disaster response, which was the top priority. Moreover, support from local chief executives is vital for rapid response during operations. As told by informant 3,

> *« forced evacuations took place prior to the typhoon. The City Social Welfare Department and City Health Office personnel were already at the evacuation center. At least all the children were safe because they were given priority during the evacuation. Then, together with the PNP, they secured the children's admission to the school. That was my good experience »*

3.3 Skill Personnel Inventory Leads to Efficient Services

Competent personnel with diverse expertise in disaster management are the top priority during a disaster. It requires the mind and emotions of a single person who manages and controls the operation. In addition, allowing all members to contribute empowers them to work effectively, and initiatives and the pursuit of other alternatives are required skills in disaster management. As expressed by informant 4,

> *« the moment you accepted the job; the mere mention of 'disaster' should have already made your mindset and expectations clear. You should have known you were getting into something complex, so your heart should have been tough from the start. »*

3.4 Interpersonal Skills Radiate Systematic Procedures

Interpersonal skills are the ability to build effective rapport, resulting in better relationships among subordinates and colleagues. Interpersonal skills are fostered through open communication and good rapport, which mitigates the burden of work during disasters. In addition, communication among personnel fastens the services during a disaster. As shared by informant 5,

> *« during those days, communication was completely down, which meant we had to visit each location in person. For example, during the evacuation, the CSWD and other authorized personnel assisted evacuees with their needs, especially transportation. »*

3.5 Quality Service Equates to Self-Satisfaction

Quality feedback encourages the disaster team to perform better. The informant revealed that caring for personnel should be prioritized; positive feedback and reinforcement increase motivation, and better service results in self-satisfaction. Although the job of an incident commander is challenging, tiresome, and exhausting, motivation to do the work and the self-satisfaction the incident commander feels have increased due to the feedback they have received. Apart from it, the job they have allowed them to save people, and by that is rewarding. As this is expressed by informant 2,

> *« that was great, sir. The community was genuinely thankful that we were able to serve them immediately. On our end, it also felt like the bond among our team grew stronger. We were helping each other out. When one was tired, we carried them through. It really brought us closer together. »*

3.6 Capacitating Personnel and Partners Through Training and Involvement

Training plays an important role, especially for new members of the incident command system. A series of training equips personnel to be skilled and ready. In addition to training, other sectors, such as barangay units, should be involved so that, when a disaster occurs, these entities, particularly at the barangay level, can respond promptly to their constituents. Training and involvement capacitate those in charge to respond during a disaster. training and involvement, as revealed by the informant, will be implemented through coordination and involvement at the barangay level, as desired, and through periodic training with timely, practice-based knowledge. This is intended to facilitate faster coordination among disaster team members and the barangay's active involvement in the incident command system. In addition, the informant indicated that there should be ongoing hands-on training for the incident command system team and volunteers. As narrated by informant 6,

> *« we need to gradually train the barangays, since they are the first to respond. It is preferable that they already have training and know what to do, so that those of us at a higher level can focus on the more serious situations they may not be able to handle during disaster management. »*

3.7 Amplifying Services through Adequate Resources

There is a need to procure additional equipment for rescue operations, allocate funds for the incident command system, and address role and interest conflicts that impede services. Informants stressed that, due to personnel shortages, incident commanders were distressed to see their members exhausted by the operation. They could not help it, also due to a lack of

manpower. In this situation, incident commanders shared that their members were already overwhelmed during the operation. They seek additional personnel and equipment. As shared by informant 9,

« I hope to have additional resources, equipment, supplies, vehicles, personnel, training, and other capabilities to support high-quality disaster management services. »

3.8 Bridging Individual Differences Through Professional Development

Professional development encompasses continuing education and career training undertaken after entry into the workforce to develop new skills, stay current with trends, and advance one's career. Professional development will be achieved through a program that strengthens relationships among IMS members. Educational attainment is a factor to consider when assigning IMS personnel, and attitude has affected IMS performance and communication among members. Individual differences have affected their operations within the incident command system. Incident commanders emphasized that attitude is one of the most important elements when working within the IMS. However, as these personnel interact, they learn to reconcile and respect these differences, ultimately working as a team. As expressed by informant 10,

« positive attitude is the most important aspect of disaster management. We can teach knowledge and skills, but changing harmful attitudes is the most difficult challenge in disaster management. »

3.9 Exhaustive Description

Disaster management is challenging, as the incident commander must assess the situation and determine whether to deploy the team. At some point, the incident commander must decide to terminate the rescue operation when there is a risk to personnel. An incident commander should exercise leadership by analyzing the appropriate strategy and response during an emergency.

The incident commander's primary task is to ensure that everyone in the community is safe and as free as possible from risks posed by disasters. He must be knowledgeable to manage their resources, including logistics, finance, and, above all, personnel. This is also when their leadership is being tested. His ability will be tested when a disaster arises, requiring him to employ the appropriate strategy. It is essential to have an appropriate plan and other valuable resources available during a disaster. By applying the proper response, all dangers might be prevented.

The incident commander demonstrates management skills in the proper use of resources, without loss of life among personnel and, primarily, among affected constituents. This underscores the need for proper resource allocation in disaster management, as it can affect the quality of services provided by the responding team. The proper allocation of resources must have a well-defined plan and strategy.

Incident commander should be more involved in overseeing processes used to achieve strategic goals, given the superiority of the intervention method and its infrequent application. Implementation was usually successful when management assumed leadership and established a setting in which sound plans that support the strategy could be justified and understood.

Incident commander is motivated to assist others because he seeks to save an individual's life. He has the skill to do it, based on the experience and training gained through a series of seminars and other activities that enhance his skills. He is motivated to do so because he believes he can help others.

In addition, an incident commander is motivated to participate in activities in which they feel competent and to use appropriate skills. When they implemented IMS during a disaster, they worked diligently and provided high-quality service, demonstrating that they acted in the best interests of everyone. It appears that disaster competence and stress play important roles for nurses when they encounter a disaster. This underscores the importance of competence in disaster management, where the incident commander is motivated to apply their skills. The incident commander will be able to apply the competencies gained during training and other activities. In this regard, when there is motivation to do good, fewer people will be subjected to drastic events.

Lastly, the life of an incident commander is also dangerous when responding to disasters that require heightened vigilance for changes in wind, temperature, weather conditions, earthquake alerts, and other natural and human-caused hazards. An incident commander should be prepared, irrespective of location or time.

4. Discussion

An incident management system (IMS) is a tool for managing disasters. It developed standards, operating procedures, and codes to enhance various aspects of incident management, including principles, planning, organization, and training. This system enhances coordination, resource sharing, and decision-making, enabling more effective responses to disasters and emergencies (Tsai et al., 2013).

With a competent incident commander, IMS can enhance public safety by implementing risk-control measures that prevent further loss of life and property (Fujisawa et al., 2010). Further, IMS is strongly influenced by the incident commander's leadership style, particularly during emergency response (Farcas, 2021). Effective management and leadership and adherence to an appropriate protocol are essential, particularly when responding to disaster (Baily, 2016). Incident commanders should be competent in disaster management to minimize damage from such events. To improve leadership in disaster management, mitigation measures, preparedness, and crisis communication skills must be of high quality; communication disruptions must be addressed promptly; and all entities involved in disaster management must know their roles (Mahmud et al., 2020).

Also, coordination and correspondence between the incident commander and their staff should be classified whenever possible to maximize information sharing and ensure smooth communication during disaster response (Parker et al., 2016). Breakdowns in team coordination can lead to significant disruption to an operational response (Bearman et al., 2015). On the other hand, well-targeted incentives and political backing will enhance the coherence, coordination, and knowledge sharing among various actors and arenas (Weichselgartner & Pigeon, 2015). Building well-being before a disaster is an important consideration for incident commanders and officers (Collins, 2018).

The provision of a well-structured, functional institutional framework from the central to the local level can yield positive outcomes in disaster management (Nepal et al., 2018). The success or failure of information flow from the incident commander and staff to the response team plays a critical role in disaster response effectiveness (Spiekermann et al., 2015). Effective communication ensures that teams receive timely, accurate, and relevant information needed for decision-making and coordinated action. Strengthening coordination and partnerships in this way can make disaster response systems more efficient, responsive, and effective in addressing the needs of affected communities (Jovita et al., 2018).

Resilience and other coping strategies that enhance an individual's capacity to deal with negative situations have been identified as important factors in effective adaptation. These strategies help individuals manage stress, recover from adversity, and maintain functioning during difficult circumstances. Together, they strengthen the ability to respond positively when facing challenges (Makwana, 2019). The most successful user-based training programs should be familiar and relevant to the recipient's needs, ambitions, culture, and level of understanding. Successful training must reach the right people at the right time and deliver the right content (Brooks & Urmee, 2014). Resilient performance revealed that incident management commander and teams have to established a common operating picture; effectively adopt and adapt plans and protocols; make decisions in an unconventional and anticipatory fashion; constantly reprioritize goals and tasks; enhance resourcefulness and redundancy; continuously learn skills for improved anticipation and response readiness; and exhibit good inter-organizational coordination and planning skills (Son et al., 2018).

It is important to understand better incident commanders has the ability to navigate the disaster management through the stormy sea of many influential. Incident commanders should be transformational leaders capable of addressing the limbo experienced in emergencies and disasters. The role of incident commanders is crucial before, during and after to any disaster (Nasiri et al., 2019).

Preparedness is not driven by a single cause but by a combination of cognitive, social, and psychological processes that affect decision-making and action. Disaster preparedness behaviors are shaped by complex and multiple factors, including individuals' knowledge of risks, how they assign responsibility for preparedness, and how they perceive and interpret potential threats (Kohn et al., 2012). Incident commanders can overcome some of these challenges and enhance their competence through formal training and further career development programs. Effective leadership can be gained through training. This can enhance their potential to lead the team, thereby supporting effective risk management during an incident.

Strong community networks and leadership improve fairness, recovery, and resilience in rural disaster situations. The development of social capital within rural communities ensures the representation of socially vulnerable communities in disaster recovery planning. Limited coordination can weaken the effectiveness of disaster preparedness and response efforts within these communities. Strengthening collaboration among traditional leaders is therefore essential to improve communication, resource sharing, and the overall success of disaster risk reduction strategies. The lack of a collaborative approach in disaster risk reduction initiatives requires greater attention (Zamisa & Mutereko, 2019). By working together in a coordinated and comprehensive manner, it can more effectively reduce risks, respond to emergencies, and support recovery processes (Jabar & Lamberte, 2017). The national and local governments must play an active role in disaster governance through both policy-making and effective implementation at all levels (Blanco, 2015).

5. Conclusion

The effectiveness of disaster management is fundamentally dependent on the competence and leadership of incident commanders operating within a well-established Incident Management System (IMS). Beyond technical knowledge and operational expertise, successful incident management requires transformational leadership, strategic decision-making, effective communication, inter-agency coordination, and organizational resilience. The ability of incident commanders to establish a common operating picture, adapt to rapidly evolving situations, optimize resource utilization, and facilitate timely information sharing significantly influences the efficiency of disaster preparedness, response, recovery, and mitigation efforts.

Moreover, disaster management should not be viewed solely as an emergency response function but as a continuous process requiring institutional support, collaborative governance, community engagement, and sustained capacity-building initiatives. Strengthening formal training programs, leadership development, crisis communication, and multi-sectoral partnerships can enhance the competencies of incident commanders and improve the overall resilience of disaster management systems. Equally important is the establishment of robust institutional frameworks that promote coordination across national and local governments, emergency response organizations, and community stakeholders, thereby fostering collective action before, during, and after disasters.

Competent incident commanders serve as the cornerstone of effective disaster governance. Their leadership not only determines operational success during emergencies but also contributes to reducing disaster risks, protecting lives and property, and strengthening community resilience. Future research should continue to investigate the competencies, leadership behaviors, and organizational factors that influence incident commander performance across diverse disaster contexts. Such evidence can inform the development of evidence-based policies, competency frameworks, and training programs that further enhance disaster preparedness and response capabilities in increasingly complex and uncertain environments.

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