

Strategic Human Resource Development in Organisational Crisis Management: Insights from the Malaysian Food and Beverage Industry

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ABSTRACT

Organisational crises can disrupt business continuity, employee well-being, and organisational performance, highlighting the need for effective human resource development (HRD) practices to support organisational preparedness and response. Despite growing recognition of the strategic role of HR in crisis management, limited research has examined how HRD contributes to organisational crisis management within the Malaysian food and beverage industry. This study explores the role of HRD in organisational crisis management, with particular attention to leadership, strategic partnership with human resource management (HRM), and strategic partnership with line management. A qualitative multiple-case study approach was adopted, involving semi-structured interviews with 16 strategic decision-makers from 10 organisations in Malaysia's food and beverage industry. Interview and secondary data were analysed using thematic content analysis supported by NVivo.

Keywords: Human resource management, crisis management, qualitative Analysis, change management, Covid-19, Corporate Responsibility

INTRODUCTION

The Human Resource Development (HRD) function is increasingly recognized as pivotal to the success and resilience of organizations (Mitsakis, 2021). However, HRD remains an ambiguous construct with various interpretations in the literature, leading to diverse manifestations that significantly influence crisis management effectiveness and overall organizational performance (Chapman & Ward, 2020; Bhaduri, 2022). The challenges organizations face in leveraging HRD to gain a competitive advantage during crises often stem from a limited understanding of their strategic capabilities within specific contexts (Bhaduri, 2022). In recent years, research examining the impacts of crises on organizations has gained traction among scholars and practitioners alike. This growing focus on crisis preparedness is evidenced by the rising number of organizations affected by crises and the resultant effects on individuals, communities, and businesses (Arora & Suri, 2023). Globally, even high-profile companies have experienced significant product crises, leading to financial losses, reputational damage, and stakeholder discontent. For instance, a study by Tworzydło and

Szuba (2019) revealed that approximately 60% of businesses have faced a product crisis, underscoring the urgency for effective crisis management strategies. Notable examples include Nissan and Toyota's recall of 6.56 million vehicles in 2015 due to faulty airbags and a 2020 recall of around 2.46 million Acura and Honda vehicles in the United States for similar safety issues (Chikudate, 2019).

These incidents highlight the imperative for companies to adopt proactive measures in crisis management. While it is unrealistic to prepare for every conceivable crisis, organizations increasingly recognize that effective crisis preparation can yield positive outcomes if they respond swiftly when crises arise (Chikudate, 2019; Cleeren et al., 2021). Preparation serves as a form of insurance against adverse events, reinforcing the necessity for comprehensive crisis management frameworks (Cleeren et al., 2021). As the business landscape continues to evolve, organizations must comprehend the crucial role of HRD interventions in mitigating risks and enhancing resilience (Hughes, Gosney, & Sims, 2022). In an environment where crises can severely impact reputation, brand loyalty, and stakeholder trust, HRD strategies become essential for equipping firms with the competitive advantages needed to maintain stability and navigate crises effectively (Lockwood, 2020; Mackenzie, Garavan, & Carbery, 2021). This study aims to explore the specific contributions of HR personnel in crisis management within the Malaysian food and beverage industry, offering insights into how strategic HR practices can bolster organizational resilience and facilitate effective risk reduction.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Crisis Management in an Organizational Context

The literature on crisis management emphasizes formal frameworks that outline the stages of crisis readiness, response, and recovery in organizations, such as Mitroff's Five-Stage Crisis Model (1988) and Fink's Crisis Life Cycle Model (1986). The importance of Human Resource Development (HRD) in building organizational resilience throughout different stages is highlighted by these models. In particular, through staff training, leadership development, and scenario preparation, HRD is acknowledged for its contributions to crisis preparedness (Garavan et al., 1999; Wang & Hutchins, 2010). HRD's role in crisis management becomes particularly important in high-stakes industries like food and beverage, where customer trust and public safety are of utmost importance. This is demonstrated by the halal certification crisis that global firms in Malaysia are currently facing. Quick response and sensemaking during crises are also made possible by effective leadership and a supportive company culture, which are frequently created through HRD activities (Weick, 1995; Schein, 2010). Furthermore, HRD is positioned as a crucial element in risk assessment, emergency planning, and post-crisis learning due to its linkage with disaster risk reduction (DRR) policies, such as the Sendai Framework. Despite this, little research has been done on HRD's function in crisis situations that are specific to a given sector, especially in Malaysia's food and beverage sector. By investigating HRD's contributions to crisis planning and response, this study seeks to close this gap and advance the body of knowledge on crisis management and risk reduction in high-stakes situations.

Role of Human Resource Development in crisis preparedness and response

The role of HR in continuously developing employees in the organisation is seen as associated with ensuring that crisis management reaches maturity in the organisation. This notion is in line with the finding by Hutchins and Wang, (2008) that SHRD has two contributions to organisations pertaining to crisis management. Firstly, it provides organisations with capabilities to manage a crisis. Secondly, it enables organisations to understand the objective of crisis management, such as learning to prevent, improve, or respond to a crisis in the future. The aspect that researchers mostly recommended to improve in organisational crisis management is organisational learning (Wooten, 2008). The study by Wooten (2008) discovered that there are several skills, abilities, or traits that characterise crisis leadership, and these competencies are associated with the key phases of the crisis management process. Leaders with these skills and competencies may not only avoid a crisis but also enhance company growth, performance, and employee morale and commitment. The findings also highlighted several training programmes that can help in preventing and preparing for a crisis. One of the crises that relate to organisational learning is the SARS crisis in China. In responding to the crisis, they began

to plan on how to handle a future crisis; they engaged in learning to identify which strategy would work if a similar crisis arises in the future (Hutchins and Wang., 2008).

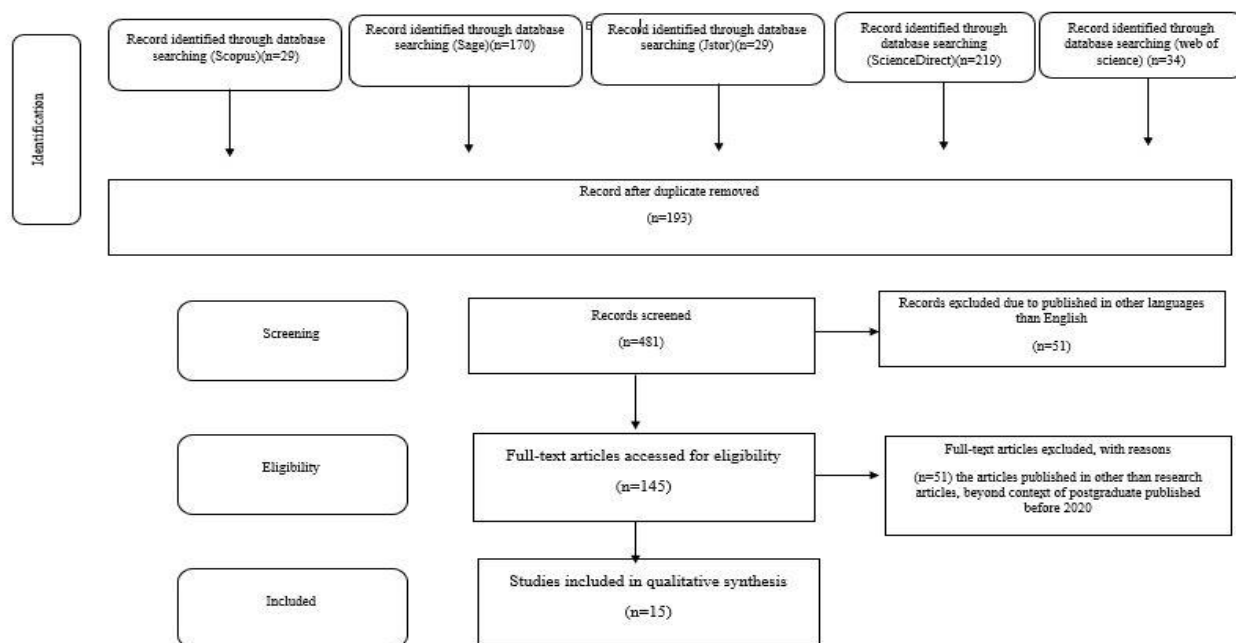
Moreover, the most powerful HR tool in developing and managing people's attitude and their competencies is training. Numerous studies have measured the importance of training in enhancing the understanding of employees and leaders, as well as the importance of crisis management initiatives and preparation in the entire organisation (Johansen, Aggerholm and Fransen, 2012). Besides that, the study by Johansen, Aggerholm and Fransen, (2012) shows that 70% of the municipalities reviewed saw a need to strengthen the internal crisis management and crisis communication efforts. Training for internal crisis management and crisis communication is believed to be the most important element in ensuring the success of organisational crisis management (Johansen, Aggerholm and Fransen, 2012). The study by Vardarlier (2016) mentioned that leadership is the most important aspect in the implementation of crisis management initiatives. Effective crisis leadership is critical in emphasising the crisis management agenda (Hutchins and Wang, 2008). Wooten and James (2008) added that leadership competencies may be enhanced through training and development, promoting learning within and across networks, aligning crisis management efforts with the core values of the organisation, and continually learning from experience. Their study discovered that there are many competencies that leaders must enhance during each stage of a crisis, including engaging in sense-making and perspective-taking activities, engaging in effective decision making, risk taking, and communication. Meanwhile, Fener and Cevik (2015) stated that leadership is also about teamwork as a group and the relationship among group members in every stage of a crisis. Intelligence, a strong personality, and intuition are necessary traits for a leader in every organisation.

Communication and organisation culture are considered to be the backbone of crisis management (Hong, 2012). Therefore, to create an effective crisis management plan, HR is believed to play a proactive role in developing strategies and providing applications to business in preparation for a crisis. Hosie and Smith (2004) stated that due to global terrorism, major criminal activities, and threats of natural catastrophes, every organisation has a dire need for HR professionals who are well-versed in crisis response and management. Hosie and Pforr, (2016) stressed in his study that these events require different responses at sectoral, organisation, and individual levels which cannot be achieved with simplistic solutions. Hence, deep organisation learning, and reflection are required to handle the threats. Quality HR initiatives are therefore a vital aspect of any well-conceived and executed crisis management strategy. Consequently, the demand for HR to protect people and assets is high in national and international contexts. This research objective explores the main purpose of the study, which is to examine SHRD's roles from the perspectives of top management leadership, strategic partnership with the line management, and strategic partnership with HRM. This research objective entails how practitioners may learn by implementing HRD in crisis management and enhance organisational crisis management efforts. Interestingly, throughout the data collection process, many important themes were mentioned by the participants in learning about the roles of HRD in the crisis management process. Given the scarcity of research on the internal and external contexts of SHRD's roles and learning, this study attempts to integrate the key concept and theory of the roles of HRD (top management leadership, strategic partnership with HRM, and strategic partnership with the line management) and apply them in the organisational context. A systematic literature review was conducted using the following electronic databases: Scopus, SAGE, JSTOR, Science Direct Journal, and Web of Science. The search terms used for this review process were "Human resource development role in crisis management", "crisis management", "leadership", and "strategic human resource development". There was no restriction regarding the language and date for the search process. Table 1 shows the detailed search strategy for each electronic database. All the related findings retrieved during the literature search process were exported into the reference management software Endnote X7. Subsequently, the author independently screened the titles and abstracts for relevant papers. Through the systematic review process, the study included previous studies investigating the relationship between HR and crisis management and excluded any thesis, student dissertation, or governmental report.

Table 1 Search Strategy for Each Database

Database	Timespan	Search Field	Language	Returns
Scopus	2000-2021	All fields	English	29
Sage	2000-2021	All fields	English	170
JSTOR	2000-2021	All fields	English	29
Science Direct Journal	2000-2021	All fields	English	219
Web of Science	2000-2021	All fields	English	34

Figure 1: PRISMA Flow Diagram of the Included and Excluded Studies



A total of 481 studies were identified from the literature search. During the duplication-finding process, a total of 193 titles were excluded from the study, leaving the remainder of 288 titles. Next, each remaining title was screened, and a total of 51 titles were excluded. Subsequently, the abstracts of the 237 remaining titles were read, resulting in a total of 92 abstracts excluded and only 145 related abstracts retained. After that, the full texts of all the remaining abstracts were identified, and consequently, 130 full texts were excluded since they do not explain the HR and crisis management discipline relationship. Thus, this left only 15 full texts for review.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative research design to investigate the role of Human Resource Development (HRD) in crisis management across three phases: pre-crisis, during-crisis, and post-crisis. Given the wide range of crises organizations may encounter—from minor incidents to severe public health threats, such as natural disasters (e.g., earthquakes and tsunamis) this research focuses on crises within organizational contexts, illustrated by the halal certification crisis, covid-19 and also other related crisis occur in the organizations that impacted multinational corporations in Malaysia. Semi-structured interviews served as the primary method of data collection, enabling participants to share their experiences with HRD practices in a flexible yet purpose-driven manner. The sample consisted of 16 strategic decision-makers from ten diverse organizations within Malaysia's food and beverage industry, selected to reflect varied organizational backgrounds and crisis management expertise, thus ensuring a rich spectrum of insights into HRD's role in crisis response.

In addition to interview data, secondary data from news articles, government reports, organizational documents, and archival records were collected, allowing for data triangulation and providing a broader contextual understanding of organizational responses to crises. Thematic Content Analysis (TCA), supported by NVIVO software, was used to analyze the qualitative data, facilitating the identification and categorization of key themes and relationships. An inductive coding approach allowed new themes to emerge, supporting a nuanced exploration of HRD's role in enhancing organizational resilience. To ensure reliability, an audit trail was maintained, and member-checking was conducted to confirm the accuracy of interview interpretations. Triangulating interview data with secondary sources further strengthened the study's validity, providing a comprehensive view of HRD's role in organizational preparedness and crisis response. Table 2 describes the selected organizations and individuals.

Table 2 Characteristics of Study Participants

Company	Job Title	Number of informants	Description of the company
Company A	Head of Corporate and Govern Affairs, External Relations Matters Executive	2	Multinational confectionary, snack food and beverage company
Company B	Manager of HR and Admin, Admin Executive, HR Executive Junior	3	Well-known bread company in Malaysia since 1990
Company C	Manager of Human Resources	1	Leading Manufacturer of Chocolate and Layer Cake Industry
Company D	Senior Executive Human Resource, Senior Manager HR, Senior Manager Management	3	Leading and fast growing bread brand since 1969
Company E	Branch Director, Executive HR	2	Curry powder manufacturing company since 1984
Company F	Talent Acquisition Specialist	1	Multinational corporation, coffee and biscuits
Company G	Senior Executive HR	1	Leading food manufacturing industry in Malaysia, soy sauce and variety of sauces in bottles and cans
Company H	Senior Executive HR	1	Various curry powder manufacturing company
Company I	Manager HR	1	Leading rice manufacturing company in Malaysia
Company J	Manager HR	1	Bread Leading Manufacturer in Malaysia

RESULTS

This study explores how leadership qualities among top management and various organizational levels contribute to effective crisis management. Key attributes identified include leadership commitment, humility, personality, and stakeholder relationship management. These characteristics align with the growing discourse on human resource development (HRD) and the role of leadership in crisis response, highlighting the essential influence of managerial behavior on crisis outcomes. A central theme that emerged is the importance of humility in leadership, a quality increasingly acknowledged in crisis leadership literature. Research by Chiu, Owens, and Tesluk (2016) indicates that humility enables leaders to create a psychologically safe environment, which supports team cohesion, trust, and job satisfaction critical factors for organizational stability during

crises. Unlike traditional leadership models that emphasize charisma and assertiveness, humility-based leadership is more closely associated with adaptability and resilience, particularly relevant in high-stakes situations (Maldonado, 2021). Participants in this study expressed that humility should permeate all leadership levels to establish a unified and adaptable crisis response culture across the organization. One participant emphasized the importance of a “lead with the heart” approach, advocating for leaders who integrate emotional intelligence into their decision-making processes. This approach is consistent with theories of transformational leadership, which suggest that leaders who demonstrate empathy and engage authentically with their teams foster stronger team alignment and morale. She described this as follows:

“There is also another value which is leading with head and heart. A lot of leaders when they lead the organization only use their heads; they don’t use their hearts. The heart is very important. That is why we feel that here, powerful conversation is also very important.”

The research further underscores that crisis leadership is not a one-size-fits-all approach; instead, it varies depending on organizational context and the leader’s ability to align both internal operations (internal fit) and external demands (external fit). Crisis management theories, such as the contingency theory of leadership, support this perspective, emphasizing that effective leadership adapts to situational requirements to align organizational capabilities with the needs of the moment. Several participants underscored that a leader’s commitment to continuous learning, alignment of crisis management practices with organizational values, and promotion of team cohesion are integral to crisis resilience. For instance, Participant A, a Senior HR Executive, noted that leaders who prioritize learning and ensure alignment with organizational values positively influence team cohesion and overall adaptability. She further indicated that a leader’s mindset, adaptability, and problem-solving abilities can significantly impact crisis outcomes, aligning with crisis sense-making theories that highlight the importance of cognitive flexibility and strategic orientation in effective crisis leadership.

Conversely, some participants observed challenges in leadership commitment during crises. Participant B, another Senior HR Executive, reflected on cases where leaders delayed critical decisions, causing confusion and miscommunication among staff. This aligns with the leadership-as-sense-giving model, which emphasizes the leader’s role in providing clear, timely guidance to reduce uncertainty and maintain team cohesion:

“Sometimes being an HR person is kind of like being a stepmom, you know, because some leaders do not portray the right role in a crisis. They delay tasks, causing confusion and misinformation among subordinates.”

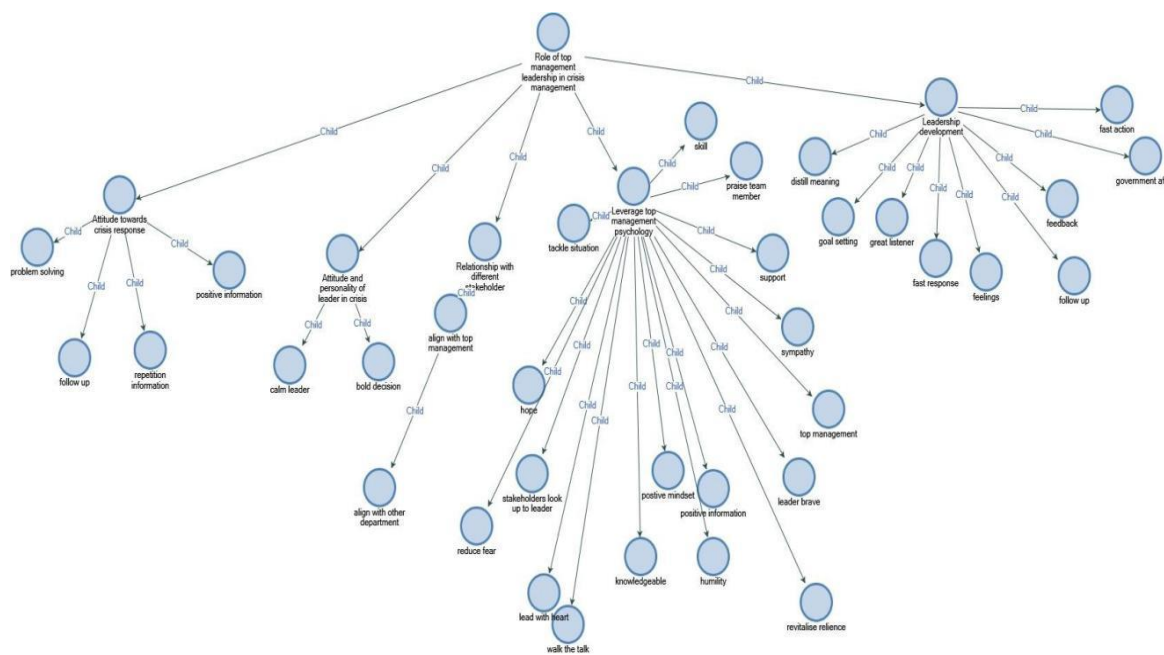
Participant C, an HR Manager, stressed the need for leaders to remain calm and steady, reassuring employees and maintaining morale, which aligns with emotional intelligence theories in leadership. She stated:

“To me, a leader must be calm and know how to calm a situation. Their mindset is crucial—they must instill confidence and motivation among staff, especially when they’re worried. We reassure them to stay home if unwell and follow SOPs.”

These findings reveal that interpersonal skills, such as emotional regulation and communication, are essential for leaders to support employee morale and well-being effectively during crises. Lastly, the role of leadership in sustaining organizational performance during crises was emphasized by Participant D, a Senior Executive in the food industry. Given the constant operational demands of her sector, she explained how managers rely on teamwork and rapid decision-making to ensure continuity and maintain employee commitment during disruptions. This reflects the adaptive leadership framework, which emphasizes flexible decision-making and team-centered approaches in crisis management. These findings highlight important considerations for leadership development programs aimed at enhancing crisis preparedness. Training programs should focus on fostering humility, emotional intelligence, and adaptive decision-making, equipping leaders across all levels with the skills necessary to navigate crises effectively. Emphasis on humility can cultivate a supportive, cohesive organizational culture, while training in emotional intelligence and communication skills can prepare leaders to manage the interpersonal challenges that arise in crisis scenarios. Additionally, integrating adaptive leadership principles into training curricula can equip leaders to align internal structures with external demands dynamically, promoting resilience across organizational levels. These targeted developmental interventions

can help organizations build leadership capacities that are both situationally responsive and rooted in core organizational values, fostering a more resilient and crisis-ready workforce.

Figure 2 NVIVO Analysis Project Map on Top Management Leadership



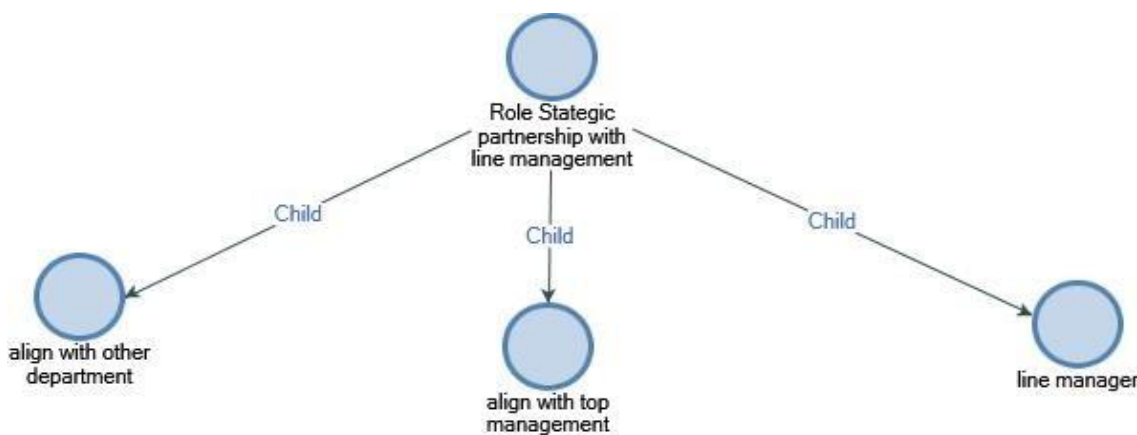
Role of Strategic Partnership with Human Resource Management (HRM)

Learning through experience could enhance organisational crisis management in many ways, including maximising individual learning experience, benefitting from useful individual advice, enhancing mutual learning experience, strengthening organisational learning experience, learning organisation-wide lessons, learning operational lessons, and integrating advices and best practices into future plans and actions. According to Thompson (2012), organisations and individuals may best experience mutual learning through interaction in a volatile environment such as the post-disaster aftermath. However, this study found that lessons learned could be achieved by reviewing the approach in handling the post-action crisis, reflecting on it, and sharing new findings within the organisation to improve organisational performance (Simon, 2000). The study's findings show that the participants were exposed to multiple opportunities for mutual learning through different levels of interaction and collaboration. Some of the participants were proactive learners while others were passive learners. Han as the experienced Human Resources Manager (R3) who was involved in crisis decision planning illustrated his organisation's proactiveness:

"Previously, when one of our food were claimed to contain fungus, I was involved in the matter concern, at that time nobody did want to take in charge of the issue when it hits, my concept the job no one wants to handle so I handles it. When I involve in this new matter many things that I learn, so this could be a nice experience for me, I also tell my staff they need to study all the things something they also go and learn other stuff to even though they HR they cooperate with the production too. Because during other thing when we learn new thing we got new experience, so that is why the leader attitude itself need to be positive" (R3, Manager of Human Resources and Admin, Company B).

Recent studies have paved the way for further research to highlight the importance of HR when an organisation is facing a crisis (Gigauri, 2020). Furthermore, Gigauri (2020) posited that HRM should be a strategic focus for any organisation to lay the foundation of employee relationships and organisational culture in order to overcome difficulties and adapt to changes. The study's findings show that encouragement and support from HR are vital for successful crisis management, yet the discipline of HRD is still left unattended (Nizamidou, 2019). R12, the Talent and Recruitment Manager, highlighted that it is important to conduct training to enhance employee knowledge and skills in facing a crisis. He said:

Figure 4: NVIVO Analysis Project Map on Issues and Dilemmas Role of Strategic Partnership with Line Management in Crisis Management



CONCLUSIONS

This study highlights the crucial role of Human Resource Development (HRD) in crisis management within the Malaysian food and beverage industry, examining HRD's contributions across the pre-crisis, during-crisis, and post-crisis phases. By analysing insights from strategic decision-makers and incorporating multiple data sources, this research underscores the importance of proactive HRD interventions in fostering organizational resilience, preparedness, and risk reduction. Findings reveal that HRD not only supports crisis response but also plays a pivotal role in equipping organizations to anticipate and mitigate the impact of crises, contributing directly to sustainable disaster risk reduction practices. The study's findings contribute to the crisis management literature by emphasizing HRD's potential in addressing complex crisis scenarios, such as the halal certification crisis faced by multinational corporations. These insights are particularly valuable for industries where public trust, compliance, and safety are critical, reinforcing the need for HRD-driven strategies that prioritize both employee development and organizational preparedness. Given the increasing frequency and complexity of global crises, these findings highlight actionable recommendations for HR and organizational leaders in similar high-stakes industries, advocating for an integrative approach to crisis preparedness.

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