The Incident Command Self-Managed Organization: A Hybrid Model for Adaptive Organizational Resilience

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Abstract

Purpose

The paper proposes a hybrid organizational model, termed the Incident Command Self-Managed Organization (IC-SMO), that integrates the agility of self-managed organizations with the structure and coordination efficiency of hierarchical systems during crises.

Design/methodology/approach

Drawing on literature from organizational theory, crisis response, and leadership studies, this paper outlines the rationale, design, and implications of the IC-SMO model, providing a pathway toward greater organizational adaptability and resilience.

Findings

This paper posits that organizations can significantly enhance their resilience by adopting a hybrid structure that switches between self-managed and hierarchical modes based on clear, predefined triggers. Successful implementation depends on cultural readiness, staff training, and psychological safety. The model could support long-term adaptability and is applicable across various sectors where both agility and coordination are essential.

Originality

The work proposes a novel hybrid model that enables organizations to fluidly switch between decentralized and centralized structures based on real-time triggers. This innovative approach integrates the adaptability of self-managed teams with the coordination strength of crisis command systems, offering a new blueprint for building organizational resilience.

Research limitations

The paper is conceptual in nature, and the proposed IC-SMO model has yet to been tested in practice. Therefore, future research could seek to empirically validate the model and explore potential barriers to implementation, which could include cultural resistance, the requirement for training, and robust digital systems.

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Practical implications

The IC-SMO model allows for dynamic transitions between decentralized, collective governance in normal conditions and centralized, hierarchical command during special circumstances such as crises, cross-functional coordination demands, or key performance indicator deviations.

Keywords

Self-Managed Organizations; Organizational Resilience; Crisis Response; Organizational Theory; Leadership

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Introduction

In the face of rapidly changing environments, organizations must balance innovation, flexibility, and control. Conventional hierarchical structures excel in ensuring compliance and accountability, especially under stress, but often stifle creativity and adaptability. Conversely, self-managed organizational forms promote autonomy and innovation but may falter during crises or when facing systemic challenges that require coherent coordination across diverse units.

This paper introduces a dynamic structural approach: the Incident Command Self-Managed Organization (IC-SMO). Inspired by the adaptability of self-managed organizations (SMOs) and the proven crisis coordination of the Incident Command System (ICS), the IC-SMO model is designed to operate fluidly between modes of decentralized and centralized governance. By enabling organizations to switch seamlessly from self-management during regular operations to hierarchical decision-making during crises or KPI anomalies, the model seeks to harness the best of both worlds.

The need for such a hybrid approach has been recognized in recent research (Butsch et al. 2025), where both traditional and self-managed models are seen as limited when applied uniformly. This paper advances that conversation by offering a design framework and discussing implementation mechanisms for IC-SMO, building upon current organizational theories while extending them into practical applications.

Theoretical Foundations

Self-managed organizations are characterized by decentralized decision-making, peer-based governance, and the absence of traditional hierarchical management structures (Lee & Edmondson, 2017). These models encourage high levels of engagement, accountability, and learning. Zappos, Morning Star, and Buurtzorg are frequently cited examples of such organizational designs that empower frontline decision-making.

However, the very decentralization that enables SMOs to thrive within projects fails to be effective across projects (Lee & Edmondson, 2017) or in high-stakes or turbulent scenarios. Without clear command channels, SMOs may experience decision paralysis, redundancy, or conflict during periods of elevated stress or when rapid coordination is needed. Moreover, Kummelstedt (2023) emphasizes that even in successful SMOs, informal hierarchies often emerge and play a role in decision-making. These dynamics suggest that eliminating formal

authority structures does not remove the need for leadership—it simply changes how it is enacted and legitimized.

The ICS originated from firefighting and emergency management, offering a scalable, hierarchical model for coordinating multiple agencies rapidly during crises (Moynihan, 2009). It features key elements, including a single incident commander, defined roles and responsibilities, unified command structures, and rapid mobilization and communication.

While effective in managing complexity and urgency, ICS models are ill-suited for the day-to-day operations of most modern businesses. Their rigidity and reliance on top-down control can suppress agile processes and decentralized decision-making, as teams may need to wait for managers to approve (Butsch et al., 2025).

In recent years, the literature on hybrid process models, particularly in project management and software processes, has demonstrated how combining multiple modes of operation, such as centralized and decentralized, or formal command and flexible autonomy, helps organizations navigate complexity and uncertainty (Mirzaei et al., 2025) and foster resilient organizations. Butsch et al. (2025) note that SMO frameworks do not incorporate hybridization into their frameworks and further emphasize the need for further research in the area of hybrid SMO models

The IC-SMO Model: Structure and Mechanics

Structural Duality and Mode Switching

Organizational resilience is increasingly conceptualized as a process—one that unfolds via multiple stages like anticipating threats, coping when disruptions occur, and adapting structures and behaviours over time. IC-SMO embodies these stages structurally. In the anticipation stage, the SMO mode promotes openness, psychological safety, and early detection of problems via distributed awareness. In the coping phase, the system activates ICS protocols for command and coordination. In the adaptation phase, the organization reflects and incorporates lessons learned, returning to decentralized governance with strengthened insights and procedures.

At the heart of IC-SMO is the capacity to shift between two structural modes. Mode one, the SMO-Mode is characterised by self-governed operating units, consent-based or sociocratic decision processes and flexible and dynamically assigned roles. The second mode, called crises or ICS mode, is characterised by a predefined incident commander who assumes temporary control and teams re-aligned along a simplified command hierarchy with centralized decision-

making authority. This duality allows for flexibility without chaos, and structure without rigidity. It enables organizations to breathe structurally, contracting and expanding their hierarchy depending on need.

Activation Triggers

Transparent and objective triggers guide mode switching within the IC-SMO framework. Quantitative indicators, such as a significant deviation in key performance metrics—for instance, a drop of more than 15 percent in customer satisfaction or project delays exceeding 20 percent—can initiate a transition. Qualitative signals also play a role, including employee escalation reports, client complaints, or safety incidents. In addition, external crises such as regulatory changes, market disruptions, or cyberattacks may demand a shift into command mode. Beyond these defined triggers, internal network sensing mechanisms that utilize feedback loops and continuous data monitoring can identify emerging risks before they escalate, enabling the early and preventive activation of ICS protocols.

Key Enablers of IC-SMO

Psychological Safety and Cultural Readiness

Psychological forces exist, leading organizations towards hierarchical systems, without development of psychological and interpersonal skills. Thus, switching between two organizational modes requires even more development to reach psychological readiness for both modes with leaders which must model transparency and respect for both collective and directive processes.

Governance Literacy and Scenario Training

All employees must understand both the SMO and ICS logics. Training programs cover for example basics of ICS command structures, conflict resolution and consent-based decision-making, and scenario-based simulations of mode transitions.

Simulation exercises should include not only crisis drills but also role reversals, enabling employees to understand different levels of command and participation. Over time, this builds confidence and agility across the organization.

Institutional Memory and Feedback Loops

IC-SMO embeds post-crisis retrospectives (akin to after-action reviews in emergency response). These structured reflections feed into SMO governance improvements, fulfilling adaptation stage and closing the resilience loop.

Strategic Advantages

The IC-SMO model offers several compelling advantages. It enables agility without chaos, fostering decentralized innovation while still ensuring effective coordination during crises. By embedding resilience directly into its structural design, it avoids treating resilience as an afterthought or a fallback into rigid hierarchy. At the same time, it provides empowerment with accountability, granting employees agency under normal conditions while offering clarity and direction in times of disruption. Moreover, its framework supports scalable governance, making it applicable across teams, departments, or entire organizations. Together, these benefits strengthen long-term adaptability, safeguard operational integrity, and build confidence among stakeholders.

Challenges and Considerations

Despite its promise, implementing the IC-SMO model is not without challenges. Cultural resistance can arise, as employees who are used to autonomy may push back against even temporary centralized decision-making, making cultural onboarding and clear communication vital. Another risk is "trigger creep," where the frequent activation of ICS protocols gradually undermines the autonomy and motivation of SMO teams; therefore, careful monitoring by governance bodies is essential to maintain proportionality. The dual structure also exposes competency gaps, since it requires leaders to operate effectively in both decentralized and hierarchical modes—an expectation that calls for significant investment in leadership development and scenario-based training. In addition, smooth transitions between modes depend on robust digital systems and workflow tools to handle data, dashboards, and role handovers. Artificial intelligence plays a promising role in advancing these capabilities by analyzing large volumes of operational, financial, and environmental data to detect subtle patterns that might precede crises. For these reasons, organizations must view IC-SMO as a strategic transformation rather than a minor structural adjustment.

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Conclusion and Future Directions

The IC-SMO model provides a structured yet flexible response to the central paradox of modern organizational life: the need to be both autonomous and coordinated, both flat and hierarchical. By enabling organizations to dynamically shift between modes of operation based on contextual demands, IC-SMO builds adaptive capacity, resilience, and trust.

Future research should empirically test the effectiveness of this model across sectors, using case studies and action research. Particularly promising is the exploration of how AI-driven monitoring systems can automate trigger detection, further streamlining transitions. Comparative studies between organizations that use hybrid models and those with fixed hierarchies could also provide valuable insights.

As organizations navigate an increasingly complex, fast-moving world, IC-SMO offers a new blueprint—one that does not ask organizations to choose between flexibility and control but equips them to master both.

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