UNIVERSITÀ
DEGLI STUDI DI MILANO-BICOCCA

COURSE SYLLABUS

Organizational Deviance and Corporate Crime

2627-2-F8805N016

Learning objectives

The course is designed as an advanced module building on Critical Events and Organizational Learning and introduces students to the principal methods and techniques of organizational investigation used to analyze accidents, disasters, institutional failures, and, where relevant, the subsequent processes through which organizational scapegoats are constructed.
The objective of the course is not only to understand why critical events occur, but also to equip students with the conceptual and methodological tools needed to reconstruct such events empirically, critically evaluate evidence, identify causal factors, and develop rigorous and well-founded organizational explanations.
Particular attention is devoted to the processes through which critical events are investigated, interpreted, and represented by different actors, introducing students to the multiple forms through which knowledge and truth about critical events are produced, including technical, judicial, political, media, and organizational accounts. Within this framework, the course also examines the mechanisms and dynamics of organizational scapegoating and their implications for learning processes following critical events.
Through the analysis of empirical cases and the application of investigative methods and tools, students will develop the ability to compare alternative reconstructions of the same event, critically assess their underlying assumptions, limitations, and implications, and understand how explanations of critical events emerge from social, organizational, and institutional processes.

Expected Learning Outcomes
Knowledge and Understanding
By the end of the course, students will have acquired an advanced understanding of:
• the main theoretical and methodological approaches to the investigation of accidents, disasters, and critical events as organizational and social processes;
• techniques for reconstructing and analyzing critical events, with particular attention to causal sequences and organizational vulnerabilities;
• methods for collecting, selecting, and evaluating evidence in technical, organizational, judicial, and institutional investigations;
• the different ways in which critical events are interpreted, represented, and explained by actors, organizations, and institutions, including the dynamics of organizational scapegoating.

Applying Knowledge and Understanding
Students will be able to:
• apply organizational investigation methods and techniques to the analysis of accidents, disasters, and institutional failures across different organizational settings;
• develop rigorous explanations of critical events based on the critical assessment of organizational vulnerabilities and failure processes;
• empirically reconstruct the development of critical events by integrating heterogeneous sources of evidence, including documents, testimonies, investigation reports, and other relevant materials;
• compare and critically evaluate alternative interpretations of the same event, assessing their assumptions, evidence, implications, and potential scapegoating dynamics.
Making Judgements
By the end of the course, students will be able to:
• critically evaluate risk management and safety policies, practices, and organizational arrangements;
• recognize the strengths and limitations of different approaches to risk and safety analysis, avoiding purely procedural or formalistic interpretations;
• formulate independent judgments regarding organizational and institutional responsibilities in cases of critical events, distinguishing between individual blame and systemic responsibility;
• critically assess the role of safety culture and blame culture in decision-making processes and investigative inquiries.
Communication Skills
Students will be able to:
• communicate the results of investigations and analyses of critical events in a clear, rigorous, and well-argued manner, using appropriate and conceptually grounded terminology;
• present oral and written reconstructions of accidents, disasters, and organizational failures, explicitly discussing evidence, interpretive assumptions, and causal reasoning;
• critically discuss complex cases with both specialist and non-specialist audiences;
• participate effectively in discussions concerning investigation processes, causal attribution, and the production of knowledge about critical events.
Learning Skills
By the end of the course, students will have developed:
• the ability to identify, understand, and critically engage with the scientific and professional literature on critical events, organizational investigation, and safety;
• the ability to collect, integrate, and critically assess heterogeneous sources of evidence in the reconstruction of critical events;
• the ability to independently learn and apply new analytical methods and investigative tools across different organizational and institutional contexts;
• the ability to transfer concepts, models, and investigative techniques to unfamiliar cases and develop autonomous, methodologically grounded interpretations.

Contents

The course examines the principal methodological tools used in the investigation and analysis of critical events, accidents, disasters, organizational failures, and the subsequent processes through which responsibility is attributed and organizational scapegoats may be constructed. Through the application of event reconstruction techniques, evidence analysis, and causal assessment, students will learn how to identify organizational vulnerabilities, evaluate competing forms of evidence, and compare alternative interpretations of critical events, developing a critical understanding of how accidents and failures are investigated and explained.

Detailed program

The course is designed as an advanced module building on Critical Events and Organizational Learning and focuses on the principal methods and techniques of organizational investigation applied to accidents, disasters, critical events, and related processes of blame attribution and organizational scapegoating.
The first part of the course introduces advanced analytical models, investigative techniques, and tools commonly used in the investigation of critical events. Through the analysis and discussion of cases drawn from different sectors—including healthcare, infrastructure, transportation, and public institutions—and through interaction with practitioners and professionals, students learn how to reconstruct critical event sequences and analyze their underlying causes using advanced investigative frameworks. Particular attention is devoted to the governance of safety and risk in complex organizations, the limitations of traditional risk-analysis approaches, and the challenges organizations face in recognizing and interpreting early warning signs.
The second part of the course focuses on the processes through which explanations of critical events are produced, negotiated, and legitimized. Attention is devoted to different forms of investigation and causal inquiry—technical, organizational, judicial, political, and media-based—and to the ways in which different actors construct competing interpretations of the same event. The course also examines how organizational scapegoating may emerge as a strategic response to crises. Within this framework, students are encouraged to critically reflect on the relationships between evidence, causal attribution, responsibility, and the production of knowledge.
In the final part of the course, students conduct investigative analyses of real-world cases through the simulation of an inquiry commission. Working in groups, they apply the methodological tools acquired during the course to reconstruct complex critical events, evaluate evidence from multiple sources, and formulate organizational explanations that are both theoretically grounded and methodologically rigorous. Illustrative cases include the Fukushima and Three Mile Island nuclear accidents, the Herald of Free Enterprise disaster, the Cerro Grande wildfire, the Bristol Royal Infirmary case, and the Esso Longford gas plant explosion.
The course emphasizes active learning. Lectures are complemented by guided discussions, the analysis of original documentation, investigative exercises, and inquiry simulations. The overall aim is to develop independent judgment, critical reasoning, and advanced skills in organizational analysis and investigation, while fostering a deeper understanding of how knowledge about critical events is produced, how causes are attributed, and how safety and risk are governed in complex organizations.

Prerequisites

The course is intended for students who have already acquired the basic conceptual foundations of critical events and organizational learning, particularly through the course Critical Events and Organizational Learning. No specialized technical expertise is required. The course adopts an organizational and sociological perspective and is taught at an advanced level.

Teaching methods

The course combines different teaching formats, including:
• Lectures;
• Guided discussion of empirical cases;
• Analysis of documentary and journalistic materials;
• Viewing and discussion of audiovisual materials;
• Guest lectures and seminars.
The course is designed to promote active student participation. Teaching activities will consist approximately of:
• 40% lecture-based teaching;
• 60% interactive learning activities (investigative exercises, group work, case analyses, and case-study presentations).
All classes will be held in person.

Assessment methods

Both attending and non-attending students will be assessed through a written examination consisting of open-ended questions based on the materials listed under “Reading List”. No mid-term examinations are scheduled.
The assessment is intended to evaluate students’ understanding of the course contents and their ability to critically reflect on key issues addressed during the course.

Evaluation criteria include:
• knowledge and understanding of the main theoretical and methodological concepts;
• ability to apply these concepts and investigative tools to the analysis of critical events;
• ability to formulate rigorous and critically argued interpretations.

Textbooks and Reading Materials

Attending and non-attending students
• Catino, M. (2022). Trovare il colpevole. La costruzione del capro espiatorio nelle organizzazioni. Bologna: il Mulino (full text).

Sustainable Development Goals

INDUSTRY, INNOVATION AND INFRASTRUCTURE