



Teaching Public Relations

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Perspectives on Crisis Communication

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The term "crisis communication" increasingly has become a subspecialty in public relations. The field has its own literature, distinct research questions, and even holds an annual convention.¹ Equally important, crisis communication programs have gained acceptance within industry and have been incorporated into the curriculum at several academic institutions.

But reading the literature on crisis communication is often bewildering. Researchers begin from a variety of disciplinary perspectives, and the terminology they employ often is confusing. In addition, the rapid growth of this subspecialty has created pedagogical problems surrounding how best to teach "crisis communication" within a public relations program.

This article has four main purposes: (1) to examine the emergence of crisis communication; (2) to analyze its interdisciplinary focus; (3) to discuss the most controversial research issue in the field; and (4) to conclude with several strategies for teaching a course in crisis communication.

The Emergence of Crisis Communication

The pivotal term in the field of crisis communication is "crisis." Often the term has been used interchangeably with catastrophe, calamity, or disaster with no attempt to delineate the severity or scope of a problem.² Guth ultimately may be correct in implying that the concept of "crisis" is an ambiguous "term of art" that differs widely based upon the severity of a problem.³ But the concept requires some concrete parameters if the terms to exist as a meaningful unit of analysis. Barton has defined a "crisis" as a situation characterized by (1) surprise (2) a high threat to important values and (3) a short decision time.⁴ Fink defines a crisis as an "unstable time or state of affairs in which a decisive change is impending--either one with the distinct possibility of a highly undesirable outcome or one with the distinct possibility of a highly desirable and extremely positive outcome."⁵ Both definitions consist of highly elastic terms, but the ideas provide a framework to identify the boundaries of the concept.

There is no shortage of examples of crisis situations. The Tylenol case has come to represent crisis communication at its best; the Exxon Valdez oil spill has become the benchmark for crisis management at its worst. But other examples of crises are plentiful: the Perrier recall, the Union Carbide/Bhopal chemical leak, the Oklahoma City terrorist bombing, and the unfounded allegations of tampering in the

Diet Pepsi case. Several companies now rehearse for worst-case scenarios. For instance, Shell Oil routinely schedules two-day workshops that allow managers to plan for and rehearse economic crises, acts of terrorism, and the occurrence of war in oil-rich territories. Kellogg executives are asked twice a year to plan for worst-case incidents in their division, ranging from product tampering to unexpected damage to crops. But as Pauchant and Mitroff explain, "[T]he best available evidence indicates that fewer than 10 to 15 percent of the large corporations in North America and Europe have currently developed significant crisis management plans."⁶ The more typical situation is the crisis-prone organization, where strategic planning and anticipating issues have not been implemented.

Heath and Nelson identify three conditions when such companies are most willing to take advice from a public relations practitioner, (1) Advice is more influential when it is directed at short-term rather than long-term issues; (2) Advice is more influential in companies that are highly regulated and that must be aware of their environment; and (3) Advice is more influential and more actively relied upon among large rather than small companies.⁷ Guth confirms the hypothesis that "larger organizations tend to be more crisis-prone than smaller organizations,"⁸ and thus more likely to be pre-disposed to developing a crisis communication program.

The acceptance of crisis communication programs has occurred most prominently in one sector of industry. Just as the railroads and the public utility companies were the first to embrace public relations at the start of the twentieth century, the large oil and chemical companies have become the present-day leaders in pioneering crisis communication programs. These oil and chemical companies work in a high-risk environment where a disaster may occur at any time. They also are working in a context where environmentalists are seeking stringent safeguards to protect the public from corporations. Forward-looking companies such as British Petroleum and Motorola have devoted considerable resources to preparing for worst-case scenarios. The chief impetus motivating these organizations is the lingering image of the Exxon Valdez. The Exxon Valdez was only the twenty-eighth largest oil spill in the world.⁹ But because of the failure of Exxon to anticipate the disaster and to communicate effectively with its constituencies, the Exxon Valdez oil spill has become the most prominent landmark of what not to do when a crisis occurs.

Interdisciplinary Research

Crisis communication has become a crossroads for interdisciplinary research. Since a research tradition is only now emerging, the field is searching for analytical concepts and methodologies. Many of these concepts draw upon findings in a variety of disciplines. This situation is not surprising because the researchers themselves represent such diverse fields as communication, psychology, sociology, organizational behavior, and strategic management—to cite only a handful of the more active academic disciplines. The research methodologies have been fluid, and any attempt to identify dominant approaches becomes a reductionist endeavor. Nonetheless, it may be useful to examine three approaches that have emerged to provide researchers with assistance: Therapeutic Criticism, Issues Management, and Eclectic Criticism.

Therapeutic Criticism. Braverman and Braverman, for instance, utilize a clinical psychological approach to study organizations. They look for traumas and the inability of personnel to talk about key problems facing the organization, e.g., large-scale layoffs, loss of a major contract, increased competition in the field. The Bravermans assume that, just as a person who faces a trauma must relieve his/her anxieties, organizations have collective traumas that need to be discussed, not suppressed. In the most critical instance, an organization, struck by a crisis, may never fully recover from a trauma. As the Bravermans note, "The ensuing loss in productivity, turnover, and general health can be minimized when management initiates a prompt and well-planned trauma response."¹⁰ The therapeutic approach offers a

vocabulary and an outlook for assessing how individuals handle stress, and it provide insights into the irrational responses that often occur during and after a crisis.

Issues Management. Another approach to crisis communication is issues management. The threshold factor in the issues management approach is how to create an ongoing dialogue between the company and its relevant constituencies. The issues management approach draws a distinction between long-range planning and crisis communication. Long-range planning involves monitoring issues, establishing priorities, and communicating the company's viewpoint to its several constituencies. During a crisis situation, the strategy of the company becomes re-oriented "to provide accurate information as quickly as possible,"¹¹ and to draw upon the reservoir of good will and trust that the company previously has established. As Heath and Nelson explain, "if a climate of trust has existed between the public and the company, a crisis is easier to redirect than if the public has been concerned about the company and if the crisis adds to the apprehension."¹²

The issues management approach emphasizes that the crisis management team should communicate with the relevant constituencies, employees, shareholders, neighbors, government regulators, and those who are "stakeholders" in the company. During a crisis, there is a tendency for communication channels "to decrease and breakdown" creating delays and additional stress.¹³ The crisis management team optimally should draw upon the lessons of public relations: Communicate as early as possible, before public resentment or suspicion arise, and communicate as often as possible to keep the audience informed about efforts to resolve the crisis. Heath and Nelson contend that the enduring value of the issues management approach "is the narrowing of the gap between corporate performance and public expectations by harmonizing corporate practices with public interests."¹⁴ The major strengths of this approach are its focus on effective decision-making and its flexibility in adjusting to exigencies in the environment.

Eclectic Criticism. The eclectic approach draws upon diverse formulations of corporate responsibility and ethical behavior to examine how a company succeeded or failed in handling a particular crisis. The approach uses concepts and insights from rhetorical studies, critical theory, and interpretive-oriented paradigms. The resulting studies variously employ concepts such as rhetorical strategies, image formation, impression management, life cycles of a campaign, .symbolic and actual roles of the CEO, organizational culture, and interpretive formulations of an audience. This list is not exhaustive. But the value of any single study is based upon the ability of the critic/investigator to provide meaning and insight to explain a particular crisis. The success of researchers varies considerably, but the recent approaches have become more sophisticated and rely more heavily on theoretical concepts to anchor their critiques.¹⁵

Role of a Crisis Communication Plan

One of the most controversial issues in the field is the status and efficacy of a Crisis Communication Plan (CCP). There have been strikingly contradictory views expressed on the subject. Laurence Barton emphasizes the central importance of having a written CCP, and he argues that "Every organization should create a crisis management team before the need for such a group becomes obvious."¹⁶ Barton believes that a plan should be approximately fifteen to thirty pages, and it especially should include up-to-date phone numbers for all emergency personnel. Barton insists that a short plan provides maximum utility, contending that a longer plan, such as those over one hundred pages, will be too ponderous to utilize during a crisis situation.¹⁷ Frank Marra, on the other hand, believes that having a plan is overrated. Instead, Marra stresses the importance of the organization's culture, its pre-existing relationship with the public, and the use of effective communication.¹⁸

My own view is that the Barton and Marra approaches can be reconciled. A plan should not be seen as a fixed solution, but rather as a series of contingencies indicating a chain of command: Who should be involved in communicating with the media, what preparations should be implemented within sixty minutes of the crisis, and how and in what formats should information be released. It is unwise to assume that simply having competent people on staff and having a good pre-existing relationship with various publics are sufficient to overcome a crisis. A CCP developed during a period of calm can prepare an organization for the mindset that comes when an institution is under attack. In this sense, it is more of a contingency plan than a definite solution. Yet Marra astutely provides us with a useful warning that possessing a plan is not an end-all solution. Marra believes that too many organizations will create a plan, place it on a shelf, and neglect the other aspects of public relations. From that perspective, he is correct. A plan that is developed in isolation from the other variables in a communication situation is a "security blanket," not a working blueprint to guide action.

Above all, the key element in preparing for a crisis is the development of an effective system of communication within an organization. Communication should not be marginalized either as division within an organization, or as a process that affects all divisions. Rather, communication should be involved in the planning, response, and recovery phases of a crisis situation. In fact, organizations should follow what may be termed the "Omnibus Doctrine" of public relations. That doctrine states that good public relations is based upon four concepts: (1) centralized communication; (2) relaying good and bad news; (3) distributing news as early as possible; (4) not relying upon one means of communication--but rather, using a variety of methods to reach relevant publics.¹⁹ An organization that implements these four concepts should be prepared to encounter a crisis with an intelligent counterforce. In addition, those organizations that rehearse worst-case scenarios can test their internal communication systems to determine their strengths and possible weaknesses. The failure to use simulation exercises still seems to be a major drawback among many organizations. Guth estimates that one-third of those organizations that have written plans have neglected to conduct training sessions or practice drills based upon crisis conditions.²⁰

Teaching Strategies

There is no template to serve as a guide for teaching "Crisis Communication" in the classroom. I have used Laurence Barton's book, Crisis in Organizations as a textbook to introduce students to basic issues as well as landmark examples of crisis situations. From the many examples that Barton discusses, the class and I try to draw more theoretical "claims" about crisis communication situations. I have also placed on reserve a series of readings focusing on historical examples, theoretical concerns, and reading from other fields that might be useful. In addition, I have students subscribe to the Wall Street Journal. The Journal has proven to be a very valuable source of recent information on organizations undergoing a crisis, and it often serves as the starting point for a possible paper topic.

The course requirements are a midterm examination, an oral presentation, and a fifteen-to-twenty-page term paper with a thirty-five footnote minimum. The use of the Wall Street Journal seems to bias the topic selection process in favor of current situations, but the lectures and videotapes that I use frequently emphasize historical examples: Herbert Hoover's responses to particular problems as the Depression began, the Cuban Missile Crisis, and what has turned out to be a particularly popular case study, the Challenger Accident in 1986.

The Challenger explosion seems to be a defining moment for Generation Xers. Like the 1941 attack on Pearl Harbor for their grandparents and the 1963 Kennedy assassination for their parents, current students can recall when and where they heard the news about the explosion. Invariably, they have a personal recollection of the Challenger explosion and a personal narrative to accompany their memories. At first,

these highly detailed narratives surprised me. But, on reflection, the Challenger mission itself was a public relations event that NASA sponsored showcasing Christa McAuliffe, a teacher who was scheduled to present two lectures from space. Even the other space crew members recognized the publicity slant of the mission. As Mission Commander Francis Scobee explained, "No matter what happens on this mission, it's going to be known as the teacher mission."²¹ The impact of the explosion understandably has left a strong imprint on Generation Xers.

For theoretical concerns, I recommend three approaches. First, in Crisis Management: Planning for the Inevitable,²² Steven Fink argues that a crisis can be divided into four phases: (1) the prodromal or warning phase (which, for example, is the heart of the crisis in the Challenger explosion); (2) the acute crisis stage; (3) the chronic crisis stage; (4) the crisis resolution stage. A second approach comes from Gerald C. Meyers' When It Hits the Fan: Managing the Nine Crises of Business.²³ Meyers identifies the pre-crisis stage, the crisis period, and the post-crisis period, and he suggests some strategies that typically accompany each stage, such as denial, fear, anger, and uncertainty. I also offer students my own catchall approach that includes three stages: (1) conception, (2) acute crisis, and (3) recovery. My inception stage is very elastic and allows students to trace warning signs that were overlooked, neglected or deliberately distorted because, for instance, "group think" would not tolerate any deviations. This "group think" hypothesis works extremely well with the Challenger explosion where Level Four personnel in charge of making the final decision to approve the shuttle never saw the intense pressures being placed on Level One engineers from Morton Thiokol (a medium-sized Utah Engineering firm) to produce a decision that would conform to a pre-disposition by NASA scientists.

I also encourage students to conduct research on crisis communication case studies by using primary source materials and by not accepting the prevailing interpretation of a crisis. A good example of this approach can be found in an essay by David Berg and Stephen Robb entitled "Crisis Management and the 'Paradigm Case.'" Berg and Robb question the canonization of the Tylenol case as the leading exemplar of crisis communication. By carefully reviewing the original evidence and by reconstructing the sequence of events, the authors provide four interesting conclusions about the case: (1) That the media did not assign blame to Tylenol's parent company, Johnson and Johnson, for the deaths of seven people as a result of cyanide poisoning- rather the media focused its attention on the individual or individuals responsible for the tampering; (2) That Tylenol was fortunate that anti-tampering packaging was available and affordable at the time of the crisis because the new packaging allowed the brand name to rebound quickly to its former position as the market leader among the pain relievers; (3) That executives at Johnson and Johnson wanted to limit the removal of ExtraStrength Tylenol from store shelves only to those bottles from a specific "lot number" associated with the seven deaths; (4) that it was only after retailers and health officials ordered the removal of all Tylenol products from stores shelves that Johnson and Johnson began to recall all capsules nationwide.²⁴ Berg and Robb conclude that the decisions of Johnson and Johnson in this case "do not reflect the level of wisdom, candor, and selflessness which have been attributed" to the company.²⁵ Above all, Berg and Robb demonstrate the value of returning to the primary source materials and the benefits of asking tough, probing questions about the crisis communication strategies of a company. They provide a useful model for students to emulate because of their careful research and because of their ability to draw inferences that offer a persuasive interpretation of the case.

In addition, I try to provide students with provocative articles that reflect interdisciplinary thinking about crisis communication. Steven R. Goldzwig and Patricia A. Sullivan provide such an example where they discuss the editorials in newspapers that follow major assassinations. Goldzwig and Sullivan use the assassinations of John F. Kennedy, Martin Luther King, and Robert F. Kennedy to illustrate a sub-genre of what they call "crisis rhetoric." According to Goldzwig and Sullivan, this form of "crisis rhetoric" serves several functions: It creates a public space for symbolic catharsis-, it celebrates individual virtues;

it attempts to rebuild communal bonds; and it provides a useful call for action.²⁶ In an age where newspapers are overshadowed by electronic communication, Goldzwig and Sullivan see a therapeutic purpose in these editorials as well as an underlying desire to re-affirm the importance of community. For journalism, rhetoric, and public relations students, this essay illustrates the best results of interdisciplinary research.

Conclusion

Crisis communication programs still seem reactive, rather than pro-active. We have no solid models to predict a crisis. Moreover, any such models would have to utilize terms so elastic that the model presumably would lack sufficient and precise explanatory power. To date, we have been better at "postdictive," rather than "predictive," analysis. But several large oil and chemical companies have strongly embraced crisis communication planning and the importance of developing meaningful, ongoing relationships with their constituencies. These companies serve as exemplars in the public relations subspecialty of crisis communication.

There are still many unanswered research and pedagogical questions about crisis communication. Its interdisciplinary origins have been an asset as well as a drawback. But crisis communication programs and courses increasingly have been accepted in industry and in the curricula of academic institutions. This acceptance should be seen as the first part of our mission as teachers. The second part of our mission may be even more difficult. Through teaching and discussing crisis communication, our knowledge of crisis communication should be expanded, narrowed, and revised. The ultimate results of these efforts may lead our students to a better understanding of what is involved in managing a crisis-prepared organization, and how communication skills are at the core of this process.

Endnotes

¹ The International Conference on Risk and Crisis Management. It typically meets during mid-August under the sponsorship of the Crisis Management Center at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas.

² Thierry C. Pauchant and Ian I. Mitroff, Transforming the Crisis-Prone Organization (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1992) 11.

³ David W. Guth, "Organizational Crisis Experience and Public Relations Roles," Public Relations Review 21 (1995): 125.

⁴ Laurence Barton, Crisis in Organizations (Cincinnati: South-Western Publishing Company 1993) 50.

⁵ Steven Fink, Crisis Management: Planning for the Inevitable (New York: AMACOM, 1986) 15.

⁶ Pauchant and Mitroff, Preface, xii.

⁷ Robert L. Heath and Richard Alan Nelson, Issues Management (Beverly Hills: Sage Publications, 1983) 22.

⁸ Guth, 124.

⁹ Alexander Kouzmin, "Lessons Learned In Australian Disasters," New Avenues in Risk and Crisis Management Conference, 3rd Annual Convention, 18 August 1994.

¹⁰ Mark Braverman and Susan Braverman, "Crisis Management: Beyond 'Damage Control,'" 1992 New Avenues in Crisis Management, ed. Regan Carey and Laurence Barton (Las Vegas: Center for the Study of Crisis Management, 1992) 2.

¹¹ Heath and Nelson, 184

¹² Heath and Nelson, 184.

¹³ Charles F Hermann, "Some Consequences of Crisis Which Limit the Viability of Organizations," Administrative Sciences Quarterly 8 (1963)- 68-69.

¹⁴ Heath and Nelson, 249.

¹⁵ Elizabeth L. Toth, and Robert L. Heath, eds., Rhetorical and Critical Approaches to Public Relations (Hillsdale, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1992).

¹⁶ Barton, 172.

¹⁷ Laurence Barton, "Twelve Tools Appearing in Every Successful Crisis Plan," New Avenues in Risk and Crisis Management Conference, 4th Annual Convention, 11 August 1995.

¹⁸ Francis J. Marra, "Crisis Communication Plans: Not a Predictor of Excellent Crisis Public Relations," 1992 New Avenues in Crisis Management ed. Regan Carey and Laurence Barton (Las Vegas: Center for the Study of Crisis Management, 1992) 23-27.

¹⁹ Alan H. Center and Frank E. Walsh, Public Relations Practices, 2nd ed. (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1981) 34.

²⁰ Guth, 132.

²¹ Quoted in John Noble Wilford, "Christa McAuliff e- First Private Citizen to Fly in Space," New York Times (5 January 1986): E16.

²² Steven Fink, Crisis Management: Planning for the Inevitable (New York: AMACOM, 1986).

²³ Gerald C. Myers with John Holusha, When It Hits the Fan: Managing the Nine Crises of Business (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1986).

²⁴ David M. Berg and Stephen Robb, "Crisis Management and the 'Paradigm Case,'" Rhetorical and Critical Approaches to Public Relations, ed. Elizabeth Toth and Robert L. Heath, 97-105.

²⁵ Berg and Robb, 105.

²⁶ Steven R. Goldzwig and Patricia A. Sullivan, "Post-Assassination Newspaper Editorial Eulogies: Analysis and Assessment," Western Journal of Communication 59 (1995): 126-150.

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