4 EDITION

EFFECTIVE CRISIS COMMUNICATION

Moving From Crisis to Opportunity

Robert R. Ulmer
Timothy L. Sellnow
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Effective Crisis Communication

Fourth Edition

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PREFACE

The fourth edition of *Effective Crisis Communication: Moving From Crisis to Opportunity* supports the central thesis that crisis communication is not solely about managing crisis-induced threat but also about creating the potential for opportunity, renewal, and growth through effective crisis communication. From a communication focus, crises are most often described as destructive, threatening, and negative events, without any redeeming value. Consequently, communication following a crisis is often defensive and negative. Organizations deny responsibility for the crisis, look for scapegoats to attribute responsibility to, minimize the extent or impact of the damage, take a rigid legalistic approach, or say nothing at all. These types of responses have resulted in a declining confidence in our public and private institutions. Much of the current crisis communication theory has effectively categorized strategies that organizations employ to preserve their images and reputations.

The approach to crisis communication described in this book is different in that it provides the reader with more options for responding to a crisis beyond managing the organization's image or reputation. This is certainly a mind-set shift. All crises carry a level of threat. However, we suggest that an organization experiencing a crisis also take the opportunity to learn from the event, communicate honestly and ethically, work to minimize harm to those most directly impacted by the crisis, and develop a prospective vision with which the organization can move forward. This approach suggests that organizations should enact strong and positive ethical core values and effective crisis communication principles to guide their crisis responses. If this approach seems radical and unconventional, it is. However, as you will see in this book, we have tested this approach through many different case studies, crisis types, and contexts, including international applications.

As you read the fourth edition of this book, you will notice that it is reorganized from previous editions. The book is still comprised of three sections. The first section of the book, Chapters 1 and 2, provide the conceptual foundation for the book. Chapter 1 defines crisis communication, and Chapter 2 examines current crisis communication theory. The second section of the book, Chapters 3 through 8, is comprised of lessons for managing crises, followed immediately by practical applications. For instance, Chapter 3 discusses lessons on effective communication practices during a crisis. Chapter 4 follows up with several cases for applying those lessons to a wide variety of crisis types. Chapter 5 delineates lessons on managing crisis uncertainty effectively. Chapter 6 examines many cases to test the reader's ability to apply the lessons on managing uncertainty across crisis contexts. Chapter 7 describes lessons on effective crisis leadership. Chapter 8 provides several case examples to consider each of the lessons and how they function during a crisis. Taking time with the lessons and the cases will help the crisis communication researcher and practitioner analyze, consider, and evaluate theory and practice in these crisis communication contexts. The reader who spends some time answering the questions at the end of the cases will build a strong foundation for developing effective crisis communication skills.

The last section of the book, "The Opportunities," examines the role of organizational learning, risk communication, and ethical communication in creating opportunities following a crisis. These chapters provide suggestions for the reader to resist a threat bias in crisis communication and consider more mindfully the opportunities the crisis may produce. The last chapter of the book introduces our theory, the discourse of renewal, as an approach to effectively manage crises. Researchers can use this approach to test the viability of the theory across contexts and to assess the strengths and weaknesses of particular instances of crisis communication. Researchers and practitioners will be able to use the discourse of renewal to develop crisis messages and more fully consider risk and crisis communication policy decisions.

Theories help us understand and view the world around us in different ways. We view theory as a lens to help better understand the world around us. This book provides lessons and new perspectives for examining crises of all types. We hope that our suggestions for effective crisis communication help the reader expand and reconsider the way he or she views and communicates about crises. We also hope that the cases we describe in the upcoming chapters provoke thoughtful debate and discussion about how people perceive and communicate about these events. Finally, we hope this book provides the impetus for an expanded understanding about research, practice, and policy in crisis communication.

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PART I

THE CONCEPTUAL FOUNDATION

Chapter 1: Defining Crisis Communication

Chapter 2: Understanding Crisis Communication Theory and Practice

1

DEFINING CRISIS COMMUNICATION

We live in a society continually affected by natural disasters, such as hurricanes, tsunamis, and forest fires, and by organizational crises, such as food-borne illnesses, corporate malfeasance, and terrorism. Regardless of where you live or the kind of work you do, many different types of crises have the potential to significantly disrupt your personal and work life. No community and no organization, public or private, is immune from crises.

At the writing of the fourth edition of this book, the need for understanding effective crisis communication practices and building those skills are in ever-increasing demand. In just over two years since the last edition, cyberattacks held computer data containing essential medical records for ransom in England, Scotland, and dozens of other countries, forcing some hospitals to temporarily halt medical treatment; Volkswagen created a scheme to falsify emission levels of its diesel vehicles, enraging its customers, regulatory agencies, and citizens concerned about the environment; Fox News fired popular program host, Bill O'Reilly, and the network's founder and former CEO, Roger Ailes, after multiple employees accused them individually of sexual harassment; Japanese supplier Takata recalled millions of airbags installed by numerous automakers, because the inflator parts can project dangerous shrapnel when activated; and a sexual assault scandal at Baylor University led to the firing of its football coach and the resignation of its president. This is not an exhaustive list but rather highlights—or lowlights—by organizations that experienced devastating crises recently. Beyond organizational crises, communities experienced natural disasters like the Oroville Dam spillway emergency that prompted the evacuation of nearly 200,000 residents of California; Hurricane Matthew that hit Haiti, Cuba, the Bahamas, Dominican Republic, and Jamaica and caused flooding and damage in Florida, Georgia, South Carolina, and North Carolina; and the burst of 41 tornados in January of 2017 that caused as many deaths (20) in the Southeastern United States in one month as was seen in the entire United States during all of 2016 because of tornadoes. Check out www.disaster-report.com for an update on the current status of natural disasters around the world. We continue to experience devastating crises of all types and as a result, the current need for effective crisis communication understanding and skills continues to grow.

Because of the prevalence of crises, organizations like the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), local and state emergency management departments, and public health departments, along with government agencies, public relations firms, and corporations across industries, need professionals who have sound crisis communication skills. In short, crisis communication skills and knowledge are useful in any industry. However, because of the prevalence of crises, crisis communication skills are some of the most sought after by employers. Regardless of the type of work that you do, the knowledge and skills discussed in this book will enable you to communicate more effectively during a crisis.

Some might ask, "Who would want to work in a depressing field studying negative crises?" We answer by saying crises are not intrinsically negative forces in society. In fact, our proposition is that crises can actually lead to positive outcomes. We see crises as opportunities for learning and improvement. By their nature, crises are dangerous moments or turning points in an organization's life cycle; nevertheless, crises provide opportunities with the potential to leave the organization stronger in some ways than it was before the crisis.

If we do not study crisis communication, organizations and the many people associated with them are likely to be stunned, frightened, and depressed when enveloped by a crisis. In fact, some organizations communicate so poorly in the wake of a crisis that they are forever weakened, having lost the confidence of both their own members and the public.

This book presents strategies accumulated over many years of research as well as our experience as organizational consultants, emphasizing the opportunities in a crisis rather than the calamities of these events. The chapters illustrate key communication lessons to create renewal, growth, and opportunity following a crisis. At the crux of our argument is the contention that effective communication skills are essential to creating positive, renewing opportunities at these turning points.

The new edition of this book is organized into three parts designed to increase the reader's understanding and skills in crisis communication. Part I contains two chapters that develop the conceptual understanding of effective crisis communication. Chapter 1 directs the reader to consider expanded definitions of crisis communication and explains the many types of crises that one may experience. Chapter 2 introduces the reader to key research and theories in crisis communication. This chapter serves as a tool for building the reader's vocabulary for describing, explaining, and understanding crisis communication. Part II moves from the conceptual to the practical. In this section, the reader is presented with practical lessons, based on empirical research, for communicating effectively, managing uncertainty, and leading during a crisis. After each chapter of lessons, the reader is presented with an opportunity to apply those lessons to crisis case studies in the next chapter. For instance, Chapter 3 focuses on effective crisis communication. This chapter contains 10 lessons for effectively communicating during a crisis. Chapter 4 is comprised of six current cases to be assessed for their effective crisis communication practices. In this chapter, the reader is able to build his or her skills by applying the lessons of effective crisis communication to each case. Chapter 5 contains 10 lessons for managing uncertainty during a crisis. Every crisis carries with it some level of uncertainty. Chapter 5 explains how to communicate effectively under crisis-induced uncertainty. Chapter 6 introduces six cases the reader can use to test their skills at communicating under high levels of uncertainty. Chapter 7 delineates 10 leadership lessons for effective crisis communication. Chapter 8 consists of six cases designed to test the reader's ability to assess the effectiveness or ineffectiveness of the leader's crisis communication. In each of the case chapters, the reader is asked to make the call regarding the effectiveness of the crisis response.

Parts I and II thus provide the conceptual understanding and skill development for effective crisis communication practices. Part III contains chapters on learning through failure, risk communication, communication ethics, and a final chapter on inspiring renewal following a crisis. This third part of the book describes several content areas that every crisis communicator should consider as opportunities in crisis communication. In Chapter 9, we explain how organizations can improve their crisis preparation and response capacity by learning through their failures. In Chapter 10, we demonstrate how effective risk communication provides crisis communicators opportunities to prevent future crises. Chapter 11 examines the ethical implications of crisis and the opportunities provided by strong ethical stances and communication. Chapter 12 proposes a theory of effective crisis communication we call the *Discourse of Renewal*. We provide a description of this theory along with its applications to crisis communication. Throughout the book, we turn to a small group of landmark cases to illustrate the various aspects being discussed.

A DEFINITION OF CRISIS COMMUNICATION

Initially, we need to clarify what we mean by *crisis*. In daily conversation, the word is used quite casually. As a simple experiment, listen to the people around you for a day or two. Most likely, you will hear friends, fellow employees, or fellow students describe routine problems they are facing—fender benders, forgotten appointments, disgruntled mothers-in-law, bad hair days, or losing records of favorite university football teams—as crises. All are bad experiences; however, they are not, by our definition, crises. Similarly, with some degree of regularity, organizations face events, such as unexpectedly low sales or the defection of key employees. Again, these are difficult times for organizations, but they are not necessarily crises. *Crises are unique moments in the history of organizations*.

In a classic study, Hermann (1963) identified three characteristics separating crises from other unpleasant occurrences:

1. Surprise
2. Threat
3. Short response time

A troubling event cannot reach the level of crisis without coming as a surprise, posing a serious level of threat, and forcing a short response time. Let's take a moment to define Hermann's characteristics of crisis.

Surprise

Even naturally occurring events, such as floods, earthquakes, and forest fires, do not escalate to the level of crisis unless they come at a time or a level of intensity beyond the expectations of government officials and residents. For example, weather conditions combined in such a way that the 2013 tornadoes that hit Moore, Oklahoma, introduced a high degree of surprise to the situation. Hundreds of homes were lost, 24 people died, and the city was declared a disaster area.

Similarly, in 2011, a FedEx customer posted a YouTube video (see http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cpVFC7bMtY0 or search FedEx delivery goes terribly wrong) of the carrier throwing his computer monitor over a high gate and into his yard. The video was viewed millions of times. At that moment, this event was certainly a surprise and a crisis for FedEx. FedEx quickly responded to the surprise of the crisis (see http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4ESU_PcqI38 or search FedEx response to customer video) by communicating with its customers and the general public about the crisis. Ultimately, this crisis threatened the long-standing values of FedEx and the viability of its service for customers.

Threat

All crises create threatening circumstances that reach beyond the typical problems organizations face. The threat of a crisis can affect the organization's financial security, its customers, residents living near a production facility, and others. For example, when a BP oil rig exploded in the Gulf of Mexico in 2010 and spilled millions of gallons of oil into the Gulf, the crisis threat was widespread. The considerable amount of oil on the water's surface was devastating to the fishing industry in the area. Birds and other sea animals were also impacted by the spill, thereby adding levels of threat to the ecosystem of the region. To begin to learn about the effects of the oil spill, BP initially contributed $500 million through a Gulf of Mexico Research Initiative to study the short- and long-term effects of the oil spill on the environment and marine life. One would expect the response and recovery efforts, along with a complete understanding of the effects of the oil spill on the Gulf of Mexico, to continue for many years.

Oil spills occur with some regularity worldwide. They are usually contained quickly, causing little long-term damage. Oil spills seldom reach the crisis level. In BP's case, however, the amount of oil spilled created a heightened threat level. Ultimately, the crisis became the largest environmental disaster in U.S. history.

Short Response Time

The threatening nature of crises means that they must be addressed quickly. BP was criticized initially for not communicating and responding more quickly to the crisis. In addition, the company was criticized for not having clear risk and crisis communication provisions in place for a disaster of this magnitude. As a result, after the explosion, the crisis appeared to be beyond BP's control as oil rapidly gushed into the water. Tony Hayward, the CEO of BP at the time of the crisis, was widely criticized for several communication missteps including minimizing the scope and intensity of the crisis and for lacking compassion and empathy in his initial post-crisis responses. Organizations must provide effective communication immediately following the crisis. This can be difficult because of the inherent uncertainty of crisis events and because little is often known about the cause of the crisis. However, organizations have a short window to take control of the crisis and set the tone for the response and recovery efforts.

As you can see from these examples, one of the most frustrating and distressing aspects of crisis is the persistent urgency of the situation. This urgency is compounded by the fact that a crisis comes as a surprise and introduces extreme threat into a situation.

EXPANDING THE TRADITIONAL DEFINITION OF CRISIS

In this book, we discuss organizational crises of many types, ranging from those caused by industrial accidents to natural disasters. To account for all these types, we offer the following description as a working definition of organizational crisis:

> An organizational crisis is a specific, *unexpected*, and *nonroutine* event or series of events that create high levels of *uncertainty* and simultaneously present an organization with both *opportunities* for and *threats* to its *high-priority goals*.

As we have established, much of the intensity of a crisis comes with some degree of surprise. Even in cases where there are clear warning signs, most people are still surprised when a crisis actually occurs. Thus, crises are almost always unexpected events. Because they exceed any planning expectations, they cannot be managed with routine procedures. Once an organization abandons its routine procedures, its leadership is faced with managing this uncertainty by emphasizing either opportunities for growth or renewal or threat to the organization's image or reputation in their crisis communication. See Table 1.1 for a description of each component in our working definition.

TABLE 1.1 ■ Key Components of a Working Definition of Organizational Crisis

Unexpected	An event comes as a surprise. This surprise may be something for which the organization could not have anticipated or planned. It could also result from conditions that exceed even the most aggressive crisis management plans.
Nonroutine	Problems occur daily in nearly all organizations. To account for these problems, organizations engage in routine procedures. Crises are events that cannot be managed by routine procedures. Instead, crises require unique and often extreme measures.
Produces uncertainty	Because they are unexpected and beyond the routine actions of organizations, crises produce tremendous uncertainty. Organizations cannot be aware of all causes and ultimate effects of crises without some degree of investigation. Efforts to reduce uncertainty may continue for months or even years after a crisis.
Creates opportunities	Crises create opportunities that may not be available during normal business opportunities. Crises create opportunities to learn, make strategic changes, grow, or develop new competitive advantages.
Threat to image, reputation, or high-priority goals	Crises can produce an intense level of threat to the organization and its affiliates. This threat is often described as damage to the image or reputation of an organization. However, crises can also be threatening enough to permanently destroy an organization.

DISASTERS, EMERGENCIES, CRISIS, AND RISK

The term *crisis* most often relates to organizations experiencing high consequence events. However, communities often experience disasters like tornadoes and hurricanes. Similarly, on a much smaller scale compared to crises and disasters, organizations or communities might experience an emergency, which is a small-scale crisis that is more contained and controlled than crises or disasters. For the purposes of our discussions in this book, an evacuation of a building because of a gas leak is an emergency. Now, there are important communication protocols for handling emergencies; however, they are outside the scope of this book. Conversely, a gas explosion at an organization is a crisis. The type of response necessary to deal with this type of crisis is directly within the scope of this book. Similarly, as you will see in the case chapters, the ideas discussed in this book are useful for understanding organizational and community responses to a wide range of disasters, like terrorism, natural disasters, and environmental disasters.

Furthermore, note that the foregoing definition does not mention risk. We separate crisis and risk, because we believe that, while risk is a natural part of life, crisis can often be avoided. Naturally, some people live with more risk in their lives than others. For example, some people choose to live next to oil refineries, on hurricane-prone coasts, or in areas susceptible to mudslides or forest fires. Please understand, however, that crisis and risk are closely connected, as poor risk communication can cause a crisis. In Chapter 10, we talk more about the opportunities associated with effective risk communication. What follows is a discussion of various crisis types.

TYPES OF CRISES

Now, with that definition of organizational crisis in mind, think about some of the events that would qualify as a crisis. Have you been in a crisis situation either directly or indirectly? You may not have faced a Fortune 500 company bankruptcy, but you may have witnessed a flood, an organizational leader's dishonesty, a food-borne illness outbreak at a national restaurant chain, a catastrophic industrial fire, or the wide-reaching impacts of a terrorist event. All these incidents can be described as crisis situations.

Crisis communication researchers develop classification systems of crisis types to assist them in their crisis planning and in so doing, reduce the uncertainty when crises occur. The simplest and possibly the most useful distinction to make in crisis types is to divide them into two categories: intentionally caused crises and crises caused by natural, uncontrollable factors. When crisis planners attempt to think the unthinkable regarding all the potential crises they could face, the list is not only endless, but it is also unique to the organization. We do not pretend to list every possible type of crisis that could be caused by intentional or unintentional acts. Rather, we provide a list of categories into which most crises fall.

Intentional Crises

We identify seven general categories for crises that are initiated by intentional acts designed to harm an organization:

1. Terrorism
2. Sabotage
3. Workplace violence
4. Poor employee relationships
5. Poor risk management
6. Hostile takeovers
7. Unethical leadership

Since the distressing events that occurred on September 11, 2001, *terrorism* tops the list of the most urgent intentional causes of crisis. Organizations of all types must now be aware of their vulnerability to terrorist acts that can disrupt both the organization and the nation as a whole.

Organizations are also vulnerable to *sabotage*, which involves the intentional damaging of a product or the working capacity of the organization by someone inside the organization. Typically, sabotage is done for revenge or for some benefit, such as economic gain. Similarly, *workplace violence* has become all too common in the United States. Distressed over their perceived mistreatment by an organization, employees or former employees undertake violent acts. Sadly, this form of violence has become more frequent even on college campuses. The result is often multiple injuries, deaths, and disruption of the organization and its workforce.

Wide-scale crises can also result from *poor employee relationships*. If an organization cannot develop positive relationships between management and its workers, trouble is likely to occur. For example, an organization could develop a reputation of having poor working conditions. If these conditions persist, the organization is likely to have difficulty both retaining and recruiting employees. Without enough qualified employees, an organization cannot continue to function.

Another possibility is that, when unionized employees become very frustrated with their working conditions, they may choose to take some action, such as striking. In most cases, employee strikes adversely affect an organization's financial stability. We realize that poor employee relationships are not responsible for all strikes or employee turnover problems. We are convinced, however, that when turnover and strikes lead to crisis situations, the relationships between management and employees are often controversial.

If organizations are guilty of *poor risk management*, the outcomes can be disastrous for consumers, employees, or both. For example, a beef processing plant in a Midwestern city failed to adequately maintain its sewer system, creating a dangerous public health hazard. The sewer system overflowed, sending foul-smelling cattle waste and remnants from the slaughter process directly into a river flowing through the community of nearly 100,000 people. The ultimate consequence of this poor risk management was heavy fines that forced the plant to close.

Hostile takeovers are still a major threat to organizations. Simply put, hostile takeovers occur when the majority of an organization's stock is purchased by a rival organization. The result can be an overthrow of the current leadership and the dismantling of the organization. Hundreds or thousands of employees can find themselves unemployed because of actions that have taken place completely outside their workplace. Federal regulations address some of the issues related to hostile takeovers, but such aggressive assaults on organizations still exist.

The broadest and most inclusive subcategory of intentional crises is *unethical leadership*. An extensive review of more than 6,000 newsworthy organizational crisis events reported annually by the Institute for Crisis Management found that management was in some way responsible for the majority of them. Worse, many of these crises were caused by criminal acts of managers (Millar & Irvine, 1996). We dedicate Chapter 11 of this book to ethics. At this point, we want to emphasize that unethical behavior can and often is the ultimate cause of a crisis situation. When an organization's leadership knowingly puts its workers, consumers, investors, or the surrounding community at risk without being honest about that risk, two events are likely to occur. First, a breakdown in the system occurs, which often results in a crisis. Second, when the public learns of the organizational leadership's dishonesty, it is likely to be unforgiving. Thus, the road to recovery is likely to be much longer for dishonest leaders than it is for honest leaders.

Unintentional Crises

Clearly, not all crises are caused by the intentional acts of individuals with questionable motives. Rather, many are simply unforeseeable or unavoidable. In this section, we describe five types of unintentional crises:

1. Natural disasters
2. Disease outbreaks
3. Unforeseeable technical interactions
4. Product failure
5. Downturns in the economy

Like us all, organizations are vulnerable to *natural disasters*. Tornadoes, hurricanes, floods, wildfires, and earthquakes have the potential to destroy organizations' and industries' physical plants and entire communities. Although these events are largely unpredictable, some steps can be taken to reduce their impact on an organization. For example, building a nuclear reactor on or near an existing earthquake fault line would be unwise. Similarly, locating an organization in an area that is uncommonly susceptible to floods or tropical storms is indefensible. The earthquake in Haiti was much more damaging because of poor building practices. In short, organizations must take into account possible threats of natural disasters before they invest in their facilities. A natural disaster can be made much worse because of decisions made by organizations. Despite this caution, natural disasters are unavoidable as potential crises.

Disease outbreaks are an inevitable form of crisis. Some of these occur naturally. For example, the H1N1 virus caused worldwide alarm in 2009. Other crises, such as food-borne illness, occur because of organizational failure. For example, Schwan's Sales Enterprises discovered that its ice cream, distributed nationally, was contaminated with salmonella. Thousands of consumers became ill. Schwan's successful crisis recovery was based largely on the fact that the company responded quickly with a recall in an effort to limit the number of illnesses caused by the tainted product. Product failures at some level are nearly impossible to prevent. The severity and frequency of these failures, however, can be reduced significantly with good crisis planning.

Many of the malfunctions that lead to crises are the result of *unforeseeable technical interactions*. In his classic text, *Normal Accidents,* Charles Perrow (1999) describes dozens of examples of organizations whose monitoring and safety equipment became inaccurate and inoperable because of a series of seemingly unrelated errors or equipment failures. For example, he describes how a commercial aircraft was forced to crash-land after a coffeemaker shorted out, causing an electrical fire in a series of wires and disabling other safety equipment and vital control systems. In this case, the pilots and maintenance crew were following all the prescribed procedures. The coffeemaker was wired appropriately. The crisis resulted from an almost unimaginable sequence of events piling on top of one another.

Product recalls are rather commonplace. Organizations discover unintended risks or flaws in a product, issue a recall, repair or replace the product or refund the purchase price, and move forward. Americans are so used to recalls based on *product failure* that many consumers weigh the inconvenience of having a product repaired or replaced against the risk posed by a flawed product. In many cases, consumers do not even respond to the recall. Some, however, reach crisis level. Organizations like Safe Kids Worldwide (http://www.safekids.org) monitor and list product recalls of all types for parents. By checking websites like this, one can see the varied and numerous product recalls that affect organizations and children across the world. For this reason, product recalls are one of the more frequent crisis types.

Last, organizations of nearly every kind are subject to crises caused by *downturns in the economy*. Even organizations that are ethical, thoughtful in their planning, and strict in their maintenance of safety regulations can be victims of economic crises. If consumers cannot afford an organization's products, there is little opportunity to resolve the situation with better communication. Downsizing and plant closings are often the result of economic downturns. From 2008 through 2010, the United States experienced one of the worst financial downturns in the economy since the Great Depression. The crisis, caused by increased risk taken by the banking industry and the collapse of the housing market, led to a complete collapse of our financial system. Businesses large and small had no access to credit and as a result, several large banks, such as Lehman Brothers, Merrill Lynch & Co., Washington Mutual, and Wachovia Corporation, went bankrupt or were taken over by other companies. In addition, companies like General Motors (GM) and Chrysler also declared bankruptcy, because of a lack of access to credit and the downturn in the economy. Economic downturns can create unexpected crises that have consequences that are far-reaching beyond the organizations that are responsible for creating the problems.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF CRISIS IN A GLOBAL ENVIRONMENT

Organizational crises are a consistent part of our existence. We cannot prevent them and as consumers, we cannot avoid them. Worse, crises are becoming more prevalent. Perrow (1999) explains that, as technology continues to advance and as our population continues to grow, we are increasingly exposed to and affected by crises that we could not have imagined 20 or 30 years ago.

As consumers, we are also dependent on more organizations than ever before. Twenty-five years ago, the Internet was a concept, cable television was considered a luxury, satellite television was in its infancy, and cell phones were nearly the size of chainsaws. Now, these technologies and the organizations that support them are central features in our daily lives. As we become more and more dependent on the services of an increasing number of organizations and technologies, our exposure to potential crises naturally increases.

In addition, as we move closer to a truly global society, the incidents on one continent can create a crisis an ocean away. Think of the impact that the most recent economic downturn had on the global economy. Excessive risk taking in one economy can create a global recession. Another example of our global society is our food system. As we mentioned earlier, the 2008 crisis that began in China had severe effects for many infants and young children across the world who drank imported milk products tainted with artificially inflated levels of the protein supplement melamine. This crisis resulted in many countries banning, recalling, or creating more elaborate testing measures for any milk products produced in China. As our world becomes more complex, interconnected, centralized, and efficient, the frequency and forms of crises will steadily increase. Understanding how to effectively engage in crisis communication, then, is a skill ever increasing in value. To be effective, one must be able to recognize and resist the varied misconceptions associated with effective crisis communication.

UNDERSTANDING THE MISCONCEPTIONS ASSOCIATED WITH CRISES AND CRISIS COMMUNICATION

Before we move on to presenting key theories in crisis communication, we want the reader to consider 10 misconceptions that people have about crises and crisis communication. Our misconceptions relate not only to how we define and understand crisis but also how we should communicate during a crisis. For this reason, this understanding is an important transition to our next chapter, which addresses theories of crisis communication. More important, our misconceptions about defining crisis and crisis communication practice often leads to ineffective and maladaptive crisis communication in practice. To be an effective crisis communicator means to resist these misconceptions. The preponderance of miscues and ineffective responses to crisis communication suggest that leaders and crisis communicators have some misconceptions about communication and crisis. What follows are 10 common misconceptions of crisis and crisis communication and descriptions of how correcting those misconceptions can lead to more productive and effective crisis responses (see Table 1.2).

TABLE 1.2 ■ Misconceptions of Crisis Communication

1. Crises build character.
2. Crises do not have any positive value.
3. Crisis communication is about determining responsibility and blame.
4. Crisis communication is solely about getting information out to stakeholders.
5. Crisis communication involves taking a rigid and defensive stance.
6. Crisis communication is about enacting elaborate prefabricated crisis plans.
7. Crisis communication is about over-reassuring the public about the impact of the crisis to avoid panic.
8. Crisis communication is about communicating only when new information is available.
9. Crisis communication is primarily about managing the image or reputation of an organization.
10. Crisis communication involves spinning the facts surrounding the crisis.

First, a common misconception is that going through a crisis helps an organization build its character. We believe that crises do not build character but expose the established character and values of organizations through their communication. In fact, a crisis is one of the only times an organization's stakeholders can view the values of an organization in action. For instance, it was not until the now legendary crisis at Enron that stakeholders were able to see firsthand the greed and unethical business practices inherent to the organization's culture, even though these practices had been going on for some time. Similarly, Aaron Feuerstein's crisis communication following his plant fire in 1995 illustrated the care and value he had established over time for his workers and the community in which he operated. Both cases are discussed extensively throughout the book and suggest that crises serve as an opportunity to expose the current values inherent to an organization.

A second misconception about crises is that they are inherently negative events. As this book suggests, crises can present both threat and opportunity if viewed mindfully. Although threat often becomes the most salient feature of crisis events, we contend that crises should be viewed mindfully as dangerous opportunities, as discussed in our first chapter. For instance, the Greensburg, Kansas, case, discussed in Chapter 4, illustrates that crisis ultimately created an opportunity to save a town that was slowly in decline already. The food-borne illness crises for Schwan's and Odwalla, discussed in Chapters 4 and 8, allowed the companies to update their pasteurization processes and create safer food processing systems.

The third misconception about crisis is that resolution to a crisis solely involves retrospectively determining fault, assigning blame, and investigating what happened. Crisis leadership and effective crisis communication involves creating a vision for moving beyond the crisis, learning, and creating meaning. As you read the case chapter of this book, pay special attention to how the most effective leaders are able to develop a prospective vision during a crisis. Effective crisis communicators should not get mired in the investigation processes of a crisis. Pay special attention to the industrial fires of Cole Hardwood and Malden Mills, discussed in Chapters 4 and 8, as excellent examples of how leaders can resist the misconception that crisis communication is about determining blame and responsibility. In both cases, insurance companies and other agencies determined the causes of those fires. However, the leaders of both companies, Milt Cole and Aaron Feuerstein, focused on setting a vision for moving their companies beyond the crises.

A fourth misconception about crisis communication is that it is inherently about providing scripted messages designed in advance. We find that crisis communicators would do well to devote more attention to listening to and adapting messages for their stakeholders. Recognizing and responding to stakeholder concerns is far more important than producing prefabricated messages based on what the organization feels its stakeholders need to hear. Clearly, organizations can work with stakeholders to consider risks before a crisis and develop a crisis needs assessment of types of messages and preferred channels to be most effective. However, crises are dynamic and by definition, a surprise to most or all the people impacted by the event. Consider the 2008 collapse of the United States' financial institutions. Even with strong economic models and countless organizations in the financial industry, almost no one predicted the collapse of the housing market and subsequent credit crisis. This example reveals that effective crisis communicators listen to the unique needs of those impacted by these surprising events to comprise their messages. The best crisis messages in this book come from leaders who responded to a crisis authentically based on laudable values and what they believed was in the best interests of their stakeholders. In each case, they met regularly with stakeholders to hear their concerns.

Our fifth misconception is that organizations and social systems need to become more rule-based and rigid in their organizational structure following a crisis. We believe that the more flexible and agile an organization or system is, the more it is able to respond to the uncertain, complex, and ever-changing demands of the crisis. Effective crisis communicators need to change accordingly and follow the dynamic nature of a crisis. Organizations would do well to take some action during a crisis to make sense of the situation. More often than not, organizations freeze and fail to act, often making the crisis worse. Organizations that embrace the situation and the uncertainty and take action to reduce uncertainty are more effective crisis communicators. Through a series of errors, a spokesperson in L'Aquila, Italy, miscommunicated the earthquake risk to a worried community. When a serious earthquake occurred, the residents felt betrayed. Several scientists were sentenced to prison for their role in assessing the L'Aquila community's earthquake risk. This failure to account for uncertainty created a prolonged crisis in Italy. The L'Aquila case is discussed in detail later in the book.

Misconception six is that having a crisis plan in place is the best preparation for a crisis. Although crisis plans can be helpful in preparing for a crisis, the best predictor of effective crisis management is strong, positive stakeholder relationships. As you read the cases in this book, pay special attention to how many effective organizations relied on stakeholders to support them during a crisis. For this reason, organizations looking to prepare for crises should work with their stakeholders to establish strong, positive relationships with them. We recommend that organizations work through problems and concerns before a crisis happens. Organizations that spend time establishing these relationships are better able to respond to the needs of these groups following a crisis.

Over-reassuring stakeholder safety regarding the impact of a crisis is the seventh common misconception of effective crisis communicators. Effective crisis communicators do not over-reassure their publics but provide information to their stakeholders to help protect themselves. In Chapter 5, we discuss this type of communication as self-efficacy. The more you can do as a crisis communicator to help protect your stakeholders, the better. Over-reassuring stakeholders about the outcome of a crisis is sure to kill the credibility of any spokesperson.

The eighth misconception about crisis communication is to say *no comment* or to stonewall. Effective crisis communicators meet regularly with their stakeholders and the media to answer questions, remain open and accessible, and keep everyone updated with information about the crisis. Organizations are typically caught so off guard following a crisis that they do not know what to say. In this case, we suggest that they tell people what they know, tell them what they do not know, and tell them what they are going to do to collect information about the crisis.

Misconception nine is to focus more on the organization's image and less on solutions to the crisis. Ineffective crisis communicators try to control their images, scapegoat other parties, and absolve themselves from blame. Once a crisis occurs, there is not much that can be done to save or repair an image. Rather, effective crisis communicators focus on finding solutions to the crisis and lessen the impact on those most impacted by the crisis. We contend that it is impossible to control the image or reputation of a company. Multiple events and perspectives by many different stakeholders comprise the overall image or reputation of a company. Ultimately, we argue that organizations should control what they can, which is correcting the problem and learning from the crisis.

The final misconception is that spin is a viable option in effective crisis communication. Spin only makes the crisis worse and makes the crisis communicator look unethical and irresponsible once the truth comes out. Be wary of any advice to use spin as a strategy in crisis communication. Organizations should be wary of those who suggest trying to spin the information surrounding a crisis to obscure responsibility. Organizations that resist this strategy are going to be more effective in their crisis communication.

SUMMARY

This chapter provided an expanded definition of crisis, explained different crisis types, and delineated key misconceptions associated with the understanding and practice of crisis communication. The next part of this book examines key theories of crisis communication. These theories provide both a vocabulary for understanding crisis communication along with ways to describe, explain, and prescribe the practice of crisis communication. Let's now examine how different theories help us understand and practice crisis communication.

2

UNDERSTANDING CRISIS COMMUNICATION THEORY AND PRACTICE

To define and better understand crises of all types, researchers have developed theories to understand and manage these events. Crises are studied by a wide variety of disciplines, including psychology (Morgan, Fischhoff, Bostrom, & Atman, 2002; Slovic, 1987), sociology (Chess, 2001; Clarke & Chess, 2008; Mileti & Peek, 2000; Mileti & Sorensen, 1990; Quarantelli, 1988), business (Mitroff, 2005; Mitroff & Anagnos, 2001; Weick, 1988; Weick & Sutcliffe, 2007), mathematics and physics (Bak, 1996; Lorenz, 1993; Mandelbrot, 1977), and political science (Birkland, 2006; Comfort, Sungu, Johnson, & Dunn, 2001; Ramo, 2009) among others. In addition, there are a number of practitioners who have written books about crisis communication (Reynolds, 2002; Witt & Morgan, 2002). James Lee Witt, former director of FEMA from 1993 to 2001, provides clear advice about effective crisis communication through his experiences managing major natural disasters. Barbara Reynolds provides a guide for crisis and emergency risk communication based on her considerable experience communicating about public health outbreaks around the world. Each of these disciplines and practitioners has contributed greatly to defining and better understanding how to manage crises (See Table 2.1).

Psychology, for instance, provides the theoretical background on mental model approaches to crisis communication and the social amplification of risk and crisis communication. These theories help us better understand how people cognitively perceive and ultimately respond to risk and crisis situations. Sociology provides theories on how to conduct community evacuations during all types of disasters and how communities respond to these disasters. The field of business examines sensemaking processes of leadership before, during, and after a crisis; the role of organizational learning in response to crisis; as well as organizational structures that exemplify a crisis-prepared or crisis-prone organization. Mathematics and physics produced chaos and complexity theories that have been used widely in the communication discipline as metaphors for the disruption and self-organization produced by crisis events (Gilpin & Murphy, 2008; Murphy, 1996; Sellnow, Seeger, & Ulmer, 2002). Political science provides theories, such as Ramo's (2009) deep security theory, that build on complexity and network theories for policymakers to prepare and respond to crises, such as terrorism. For full discussions of the interdisciplinary approach to crisis communication and the theoretical approaches associated with them, take a look at one of the recent handbooks on risk and crisis communication (Coombs & Holladay, 2010; Heath & O'Hair, 2009; Pearson, Roux-Dufort, & Clair, 2007). You will find that many of the lessons described in the upcoming chapters are grounded in the interdisciplinary research described above. However, the communication discipline has produced considerable research on crisis communication. What follows is a discussion of the several important theories of crisis communication. The first section examines the important role media theories provide for contributing to the understanding of crisis communication.

TABLE 2.1 ■ Academic Disciplines Contributing to Understanding of Risk and Crisis Communication

Discipline	Theory Contribution
Psychology	Mental models approach to risk and crisis communication Social amplification of risk and crisis perceptions
Sociology	Disaster evacuation theory Social response to disasters Social and institutional networks during disasters
Business	Organizational sensemaking theory Organizational learning theory High reliability organizational theory
Mathematics and physics	Chaos theory Complexity theory Sandpile/Self-organized criticality theory
Political science	Policy change theory and catastrophic disasters Deep security theory

MEDIA THEORIES AND CRISIS COMMUNICATION

Considerable theory building in crisis communication has focused on the role of media in the life cycle of a crisis. In some cases, media coverage can amplify the public's fear beyond what is reasonable (Pidgeon, Kasperson, & Slovic, 2003). Conversely, the media often moves beyond "environmental surveillance" to the point of "community building" to assist with the crisis recovery period (Wilkins, 1989, p. 33). In either case, the media is a prominent player, making a substantial impact during crises. For this reason, Seeger (2006) prioritizes forming partnerships with the media as a best practice of crisis communication. In this section, we review three theories that have been adapted through considerable research to explain the role the media plays during crises. These theoretical perspectives include news framing, focusing events, and crisis news diffusion, and exemplification (See Table 2.2).

News Framing Theory

At the heart of news framing theory is the fact that "reporters and editors routinely choose among various approaches to the presentation of news stories" (Hook & Pu, 2006, p. 169). They approach selected results in a pattern of coverage that can frame a topic positively or negatively. The controversy inherent in many crises often intensifies and polarizes the framing process. For example, an organization may seek to frame a crisis as an aberration or as unavoidable. Conversely, the media may frame the same crisis as having manifested from a lack of responsible caution on the part of the organization. This type of polarity in framing crises is not unusual.

The news framing process can have a profound impact on how readers and viewers perceive a crisis. For this reason, Holladay (2010) argues, "it is imperative that organizations participate in this framing process" (p. 161). If organizations remain passive in the framing process, they make themselves completely vulnerable to their adversaries who will likely strive to tip the media coverage of the crisis negatively. For example, a metropolitan hospital recently responded to a budget shortfall by laying off a large number of nurses. Area media reported on the layoffs, framing the budget issues as having been caused by administrative mismanagement. Worse, the stories often featured laid-off nurses with young children in tears over their impending financial hardship. Meanwhile, another hospital in the community offered to hire some of the nurses at comparable wages. The financially struggling hospital remained silent throughout the crisis. The hospital never fully recovered from the crisis and was eventually sold to another health management company. Had the hospital offered a competing explanation or frame for needing to lay off employees, the outcome might have been very different.

As the hospital example reveals, the framing process influences the public's perception of the organizations afflicted with the crisis. If the crisis is framed in a way that reflects negatively on an organization, that organization's ability to recover from the crisis is impaired or delayed. Hence, news framing theory advocates that organizations take an active role in the framing process.

TABLE 2.2 ■ Media Theories Contributing to the Understanding of Crisis Communication

Theory	Characteristics
News Framing	Emphasizes the degree to which the crisis is framed positively or negatively Focuses on news reporting Features messages by both the media and organizations (often contrasting) designed to frame the crisis
Focusing Events	Emphasizes policy decisions made in response to crisis events Focuses on policy debates that are played out publicly Features determining blame, likelihood of similar crises in the future, and lessons learned

(Continued)

TABLE 2.2 ■ (Continued)

Theory	Characteristics
News Diffusion	Emphasizes the distribution of information in response to crises Focuses on the speed and accuracy of messages shared Features the diverse means through which people receive information and the resilience of those sources during crises
Exemplification	Emphasizes the way audiences assess portrayals, such as risks to their safety and health, including the apprehensions they feel that lead to risk avoidance or to taking self-protective actions Focuses on exemplars—brief, simple, and memorable messages, such as pictures, phrases, or emotional examples, that evoke a strong audience response, either positive or negative Features messages of all kinds that include exemplars (e.g., news stories, photographs, Internet memes, public speeches, news conferences, etc.)

Focusing Events

Focusing event theory is an extension of agenda setting theory. *Agenda setting* refers to the way the media determines the importance of various news stories or political issues. The higher a story ranks on the media's agenda, the more attention or coverage it receives. Crises become focusing events when they are high on the media's agenda and the discussion moves from reporting on the cause and impact of the crisis to the reconsideration of existing policies or the consideration of new policies for preventing similar crises in the future.

Wood (2006) explains that focusing events include four consistent attributes. First, like all crises, they occur suddenly. Second, they are rare. Third, they garner large-scale attention. Finally, both the public and policymakers simultaneously prioritize them. Fishman (1999) argues that the combination of "a dramatic news event, and the media's coverage of that event creates an urgency to take action" (p. 353). That action takes the form of policy debates and recommendations for revising current policies or developing new policies. For example, the tragic shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School in the village of Sandy Hook in Newtown, Connecticut, inspired considerable debate over gun laws. Although no meaningful change occurred on the national level, many communities revised existing policies regarding firearms and schools after the Sandy Hook crisis.

Policy debates stemming from focusing events are typically based on three topics: blame, normalcy, and learning. Questions of blame ask whether or not the crisis was caused by human or mechanical failures that could be addressed with policy changes. Questions focusing on normalcy address the extent to which the crisis is a manifestation of routine procedures. In Chapter 1, we discussed various types of recurring crises. A normal crisis would fit within this typology. Sadly, mass shootings, as discussed above, are repeated with enough frequency that they are considered normal and warrant policy debates. By contrast, novel crisis types are highly unusual and difficult to address through policy changes. For example, Ebola outbreaks occur rarely in parts of Africa. The virus causes grotesque bleeding and is almost always fatal. The occurrence of these outbreaks, however, has always been contained quickly. Finally, learning is central to policy debates. The changes in policy that occur in response to focusing events are, in essence, a manifestation of lessons learned from the crisis.

As we mentioned in Chapter 1, crises often lead to new opportunities for organizations and communities. Focusing events can provide the practical means for formalizing such opportunities into formal policies. Thus, focusing events inspire crisis communication that is dedicated to seizing the opportunity to improve public safety in the aftermath of a crisis.

Crisis News Diffusion

The shock and impact of crises create intense public interest. The media play a central role in diffusing or spreading that information. As crises emerge, curious and concerned publics often view television or Internet coverage continuously for extended periods of time. As McIntyre, Spence, and Lachlan (2011) explain, “media exposure is a popular method of coping with crises” (p. 303). Theories of crisis news diffusion seek to understand how and when people receive information about crises. News diffusion includes all channels of communication ranging from television and the Internet to newspapers, radio, and face-to-face interpersonal communication as well as all forms of social media.

The surprise and uncertainty during crises pose challenges for reporters. These trials are further intensified by the high demand for information. Those who study news diffusion are interested in the accuracy as well as the expediency of coverage. Social media resources such as Twitter address the void of information during crises. Recent crises such as the tornadoes in Joplin, Missouri, and Hurricane Sandy reveal that many people experiencing and observing crises build networks and access information regularly via social media. Interestingly, Brian Stelter, a *New York Times* reporter, happened to be near Joplin, Missouri, when the town was destroyed by a massive tornado. The reporter had no access to traditional forms of media coverage. Using his smart phone, he was able to post photos and brief statements using Instagram and Twitter. These posts were viewed by thousands of people wanting information about the devastation in Joplin.

The resilience displayed by the *New York Times* reporter in Joplin is a central feature of news diffusion research. For example, Spence, Lachlan, and Westerman (2009) studied the preparation by local radio stations to continue broadcasting in the wake of a serious crisis, such as a tornado or flood. They found that the majority of stations surveyed had plans for remaining resilient and continuing to broadcast during natural disasters.

Two classic studies in crisis news diffusion occurred when President John F. Kennedy was assassinated in 1963 and when President Ronald Reagan was wounded in an assassination attempt in 1981. Nine out of 10 people surveyed knew President Kennedy was shot within an hour of the crisis (Greenberg, 1964). Nearly two decades later, the results were similar. Those surveyed after the Reagan attack were aware as quickly and mentioned interpersonal communication, television, and radio as their means of first learning about the crisis (Bantz, Petronio, & Rarick, 1983). Today, the speed of crisis news diffusion is much faster. We can receive news alerts on our smartphones within minutes of a story having been confirmed by a news source. We can also share the information much more quickly and efficiently through social media. Thus, new media channels have revitalized the study of crisis news diffusion. Beyond the role of the media in framing, understanding, and diffusing information during organizational crises, organizations must also respond and communicate during the crisis. What follows are several prominent theories of crisis communication.

Exemplification Theory

Crises, by their nature, evoke emotional responses, such as fear, anger, and disgust. Exemplification theory provides insight into how these emotional reactions are communicated and remembered over time. The point of analysis for exemplification theory is on short, vivid, and emotionally arousing visual, written, or spoken messages known as exemplars. For example, alligators are seen regularly in residential areas surrounding the many lakes in Central Florida. Although rare, humans in or near the water are occasionally attacked by alligators in the region. Poisonous snakes are also intermittently present near the lakes. Residents and visitors are warned to avoid wading in these lakes by terse warnings posted on walking paths near the lakes. One version of the signs states simply, “Attention: Beware of Wildlife,” and includes a picture of an alligator and a snake. The strategy behind the exemplar contained in these signs is to produce a strong emotional reaction that will make people aware of the risk and motivate them to avoid the water. Simply put, exemplification theory examines “the formation and modification of beliefs about phenomena and issues” based on exemplars (Zillmann, 2006, p. S221).

Spence and his colleagues explain that exemplars influence the way people perceive threats to their well-being (Spence, Lachlan, Lin, Sellnow-Richmond, & Sellnow, 2015). They explain that people typically process risk information quickly and subjectively rather than slowly, analytically, and objectively. For this reason, the immediate reactions inspired by exemplars are often extremely persuasive. Returning to our example, simply seeing a picture of a snake and an alligator triggers a sense of caution in most residents as they walk near the water. Beyond warnings, exemplars can cause reputational crises for organizations. The mere mention of bed bugs, for example, is repulsive to most people. Thus, claims that bed bugs might be present in the rooms of a motel chain or apartment complex can immediately deter patrons. As we explain in Chapter 4, simply referring to a product using a derogatory exemplar can create a reputational crisis. In this case, a media reference to “lean finely textured beef” as “pink slime” spiraled into a full-blown crisis for Beef Products Incorporated. Unfortunately, even after such claims are proved false, a relationship between the exemplar and the organization can remain in the subconscious of potential customers (Westerman, Spence, & Lachlan, 2012).

Crisis communicators need to be aware of the impact exemplars can have on the organizations they represent. The lasting images and their links to perceptions of the organization can cause lasting reputational harm. If, however, organizations provide a clear and credible response to such exemplars, organizations can minimize or reverse the harm. In two separate experiments, Spence and his colleagues, first, established the negative impact exemplars have on organizational reputations and second, provided clear evidence that responding to these exemplars through communication channels used frequently by viewers who were exposed to the exemplar can repair the reputational damage (Spence et al., 2015; Spence, Sellnow-Richmond, Sellnow, & Lachlan, 2016). The lesson for crisis communicators is to pay close attention to references to the organization, in both traditional and new media. When negative exemplars appear, a prompt response is warranted (Spence, Lachlan, Sellnow, Rice, & Seeger, 2017).

ORGANIZATIONAL THEORIES OF CRISIS COMMUNICATION

For the past 20 years, communication researchers have developed theoretical approaches for responding to organizational crises (see Table 2.3). This research includes corporate apologia (Hearit, 2006), image repair theory (Benoit, 1995), situational crisis communication theory (Coombs & Holladay, 2002), and Organizational renewal theory (Ulmer, Sellnow, & Seeger, 2009). Corporate apologia, image repair theory, and situational crisis communication theory identify strategies an organization can use to repair its image and reputation after a crisis. Organizational renewal focuses on learning from the crisis, communicating ethically, considering both the threat and the opportunities associated with the crisis, and creating a prospective vision. We briefly examine each of these research traditions.

Corporate Apologia

Research on corporate apologia was initially conceptualized as the speech of self-defense (Ware & Linkugel, 1973). Hearit (2001) defines an *apologia* as not exactly an apology but rather "a response to criticism that seeks to present a compelling competing account of organizational accusations" (p. 502). In this case, crises are created by an accusation of wrongdoing. Hearit and Courtright (2004) explain that apologetic crises "are the result of charges leveled by corporate actors (e.g., media or public interest groups) who contend that an organization is guilty of wrongdoing" (p. 210). Corporate apologia provides a list of communication strategies that the organization can use to respond to these accusations. These communication strategies include "denial, counterattack, differentiation, apology, and legal" (Hearit, 2006, p. 15). These strategies are primarily defensive and are designed principally for an organization to account for its actions after a crisis.

TABLE 2.3 ■ Theories of Crisis Communication

Theory	Characteristics
Corporate apologia	Emphasizes managing the threat created by a persuasive attack against an organization Focuses on an apology for wrongdoing Features communication strategies for the apology
Image repair theory	Emphasizes repairing the threat to the image of the accused Focuses on accounting for organizational actions that caused the crisis Features communication strategies for managing the account
Situational crisis communication theory	Emphasizes lowering crisis attributions of responsibility for the crisis Focuses on determining communication based on the type of crisis and the organization's reputational assets Features flow-chart decision-making process for using crisis response strategies to influence stakeholder perceptions or attributions of responsibility
Organizational renewal theory	Emphasizes opportunities to learn and grow from the crisis Focuses on creating opportunities inherent to crisis events Features broad leadership and organizational communication guidelines, emphasizing strong positive values, an optimistic forward-looking perspective, and learning to overcome the crisis

Image Repair Theory

Benoit (1995) developed a comprehensive theory of image repair. *Image* refers to how the organization is perceived by its stakeholders and publics. Similar to corporate apologia, Benoit (1997) explains that "the key to understanding image repair strategies is to consider the nature of attacks or complaints that prompt such responses" (p. 178). He suggests that two components of the attack are essential. First, the organization must be "held responsible for an action" (Benoit, 1997, p. 178). Second, "that [action must be] considered offensive" (Benoit, 1997, p. 178). Benoit's (1995) theory contains a list of 14 impression management strategies. Five major strategies include denial, evasion of responsibility, reducing the offensiveness of the event, corrective action, and mortification. Each strategy can be used individually or in combination (Sellnow & Ulmer, 1995; Sellnow, Ulmer, & Snider, 1998). Consistent with corporate apologia, Benoit's image repair strategies focus on how organizations respond to accusations or account for their actions after being accused of a transgression. An effective response is designed to repair the organization's damaged image or reputation.

Situational Crisis Communication Theory

A third prominent theory on crisis communication is situational crisis communication theory. Coombs developed this theory by linking attribution theory and crisis response strategies (Coombs, 2012; Coombs & Holladay, 2002). His theory "evaluates the reputational threat posed by the crisis situation and then recommends crisis response strategies based upon the reputational threat level" (p. 138). The crisis response strategies in this approach are a synthesis of work on corporate apologia, impression management, and image repair theory. He developed the list by selecting "those [strategies] that appeared on two or more lists developed by crisis experts" (p. 139). He describes four major communication approaches, including denial, diminishment, rebuilding, and bolstering. In all, he delineates 10 crisis response strategies. The crisis communication strategies are then used according to the threat to the organization's reputation based on "crisis type, crisis history, and prior reputation" (Coombs, 2012, p. 141).

Coombs (2012) explains that crisis type can be defined by three categories: "victim crisis cluster, accidental crisis cluster, and preventable crisis cluster" (p. 142). The victim cluster involves crises such as natural disasters, rumors, workplace violence, and malevolence. Accidental crises involve challenges, technical error accidents, and technical error product harm. Preventable crises include human error, accidents, human error product harm, and organizational misdeeds. Beyond crisis type, crisis response strategies should also be selected according to the organization's crisis history and prior reputation.

Crisis history and prior reputation are important, because organizations that have recurring crises or poor reputations are not likely to have their messages accepted by stakeholders. Coombs's (2012) theory is based on the idea that, after a crisis, stakeholders "assign responsibility for negative unexpected events" (p. 138). Depending on the crisis type, crisis history, and prior reputation, Coombs provides crisis response recommendations to address the attributions of responsibility toward the organization.

Discourse of Renewal Theory

As you have seen in the previous three theories, much of the research on crisis communication focuses on managing the threat to the image or reputation of the organization during a crisis. We argue there is also potential for positive discourse following a crisis that emphasizes the opportunities inherent to crises. Reputation and image are important organizational concepts, but they do not always play a central role in resolving organizational crises. The upcoming cases in this book provide many examples in which rebuilding, learning, and opportunity are more important than reputation or image. For this reason, we argue that crises also carry the potential for opportunity. To illustrate this idea, we developed a theory we call the *Discourse of Renewal* that emphasizes learning growth and opportunity following crises of all types. We see four theoretical objectives central to the Discourse of Renewal: organizational learning, ethical communication, a prospective rather than retrospective vision, and sound organizational rhetoric. We discuss this theory in much more depth in the final chapter of the book. However, what follows is a brief description of each of the theoretical components of our theory.

Organizational Learning

We believe that an organization that emerges successfully from a crisis must learn from the event. Chapter 9 provides an in-depth understanding of how organizations and communities can learn through failures, including crises. It is also important that the organization illustrates to stakeholders how its learning will help ensure that it will not experience a similar crisis in the future.

Ethical Communication

A second key factor in creating a renewing response is communicating ethically before, during, and after the crisis. Organizations that have not prepared adequately for crisis or are unethical in their business practices are going to have to account for those actions at some time. In fact, unethical actions are often the cause of a crisis. One of the key factors of a crisis is that it reveals the ethical values of the organization. Crises do not build character; they expose the character of the organization. If an organization is unethical before a crisis, those values are likely to be identified during the crisis. Organizations that institute strong, positive value positions, such as openness, honesty, responsibility, accountability, and trustworthiness with key organizational stakeholders before a crisis happens are best able to create renewal following the crisis. Chapter 11 provides an in-depth examination of the importance of ethical communication and the opportunities associated with this crisis communication.

Prospective Versus Retrospective Vision

A third feature of a renewing response is communication focused on the future rather than the past. Theories that emphasize image or reputation emphasize a retrospective vision focused on who is responsible. Organizations that want to create a renewing response are more prospective and emphasize focusing on the future, not on the past. They learn from their mistakes, infuse their communication with bold optimism, and stress rebuilding rather than issues of blame or fault. Chapter 12 provides a detailed examination of Organizational renewal theory and the importance of developing a prospective vision to communicate about crisis.

Effective Organizational Rhetoric

Managing a crisis most often involves communicating with stakeholders to construct and maintain perceptions of reality. Establishing renewal involves leaders motivating stakeholders to stay with the organization through the crisis as well as rebuilding the organization better than it was before. We advocate that leaders who hope to inspire others to embrace their views of crisis as an opportunity must establish themselves as models of optimism and commit to communicating ethically and responsibly. Effective organizational rhetoric then involves leadership with vision and a strong, positive reputation to effectively frame the crisis for stakeholders and persuade them to move beyond the event. The final chapter of this book examines communication strategies for developing sound organizational rhetoric during a crisis.

CRISIS COMMUNICATION THEORIES THAT DESCRIBE, EXPLAIN, AND PRESCRIBE

As you can see, there is considerable research from a communication perspective on how to manage and communicate about crises and disasters. In general, theories can describe communication, explain the effectiveness or ineffectiveness of communication, and prescribe how we should communicate. The media theories described in this chapter serve to describe and explain the role of media in framing, focusing, and setting the agenda in crisis communication. The communication theories of corporate apologia and image repair theory describe common responses to organizational crises and can be used to explain the effectiveness or ineffectiveness of those responses. The situational crisis communication theory describes, explains, and prescribes communication strategies to protect the reputation of organizations managing crises. Consistent with situational crisis communication theory, the discourse of renewal theory describes, explains, and prescribes effective responses to crisis. However, a central difference is the diminished role of threat to the reputation of the organization in the discourse of renewal. In many examples of renewal, issues of blame, culpability, image, or reputation never arise as dominant narratives following these types of crisis responses. What makes renewal responses so effective is they mobilize the support of stakeholders and give these groups a vision to follow to overcome the crisis. A crisis response that emphasizes threat to the reputation of an organization typically lacks these qualities and often has the potential to extend the life cycle of the crisis. These organizations often suffer from what we call a *threat bias* in crisis communication.

UNDERSTANDING AND DEFINING THE THREAT BIAS IN CRISIS COMMUNICATION

We believe that an organization that is willing to view a crisis from a balanced perspective, including both threat and opportunity, has a much greater potential for recovering from a crisis. Despite this potential, we observe a persistent bias toward viewing crises solely from the perspective of threat in both theory and practice. As we mentioned at the outset of this chapter, threat is an important part of defining and understanding a crisis. However, we believe that researchers and practitioners often overemphasize and concentrate too much on the threat to an organization's reputation or image to respond effectively. What follows is a discussion of threat bias in defining effective crisis communication.

To avoid the threat bias exemplified in current crisis communication research, we suggest that crisis communicators mindfully define and examine crisis events from a more inclusive perspective. Nathan (2000a) explains the inclusive perspective we recommend:

> [I]n crisis the threat dimensions are usually seen most quickly and are then acted upon, while the potential for opportunity lies dormant. When a crisis is anticipated or when it occurs, the manager should be able to see both threat *and* opportunity features before deciding how to proceed. (p. 4)

Nathan goes on to explain that our understanding of crisis and our crisis communication choices are inextricably linked. In fact, he suggests that focusing solely on the role of threat in crisis "promotes threat response that may, in turn, magnify and even intensify the state of [the] crisis" (Nathan, 2000b, p. 12). We argue that full consideration of both the potential threat and opportunity associated with crisis is a more appropriate and effective way to think about and communicate about crises. For this reason, we argue for mindfully reconsidering our definitions of crisis to include the perceived threat as well as the potential for opportunity emerging from the crisis.

Crises, by their nature, are threats to the survival of organizations. Certainly, no organization should hope for a crisis simply to experience the opportunities described by the theory of renewal. Rather, crises are inherent and inevitable elements of the organizational experience. Those organizations that see crises solely as threats to their public images are likely to respond in defensive and potentially manipulative manners. This defensive posture, at best, offers one benefit—survival. We contend that a combined emphasis on the threat and opportunity of crises fosters the simultaneous benefits of survival and growth. This growth manifests itself in the organization's willingness to respond with rhetorical sensitivity, make ethical decisions, learn from the crisis, and focus on the future. As we have argued throughout this chapter, these elements exemplify a balanced approach to crisis. Applying these elements can produce an opportunity for renewal that far exceeds basic survival.

SUMMARY

In this book, we hope to convince you that effective crisis management is a natural and essential part of the organizing process. We believe that effective crisis planning and communication can enable organizational leaders to better cope with the surprise, threat, and short response time that are a part of all crises. Although there are many types of intentional and unintentional organizational crises, there are consistent strategies that can help an organization turn a crisis situation into an opportunity for improvement. All crises involve effective communication. Resisting the threat bias and understanding the skills needed to communicate effectively is the focus of the next section of this book. Understand that the lessons described in the upcoming chapters are based on well-established research and practice in the multidisciplinary field of research in crisis communication. Furthermore, the next section takes us from conceptually understanding crises and crisis communication theory and moves us toward improving our crisis communication skills. Good luck with this next section of the book.

PART

II

THE LESSONS AND PRACTICAL APPLICATION

Chapter 3: **Lessons on Effective Crisis Communication**

Chapter 4: **Applying the Lessons to Produce Effective Crisis Communication**

Chapter 5: **Lessons on Managing Crisis Uncertainty Effectively**

Chapter 6: **Applying the Lessons for Managing Crisis Uncertainty Effectively**

Chapter 7: **Lessons on Effective Crisis Leadership**

Chapter 8: **Applying the Lessons for Developing Effective Crisis Leadership**

3

LESSONS ON EFFECTIVE CRISIS COMMUNICATION

In the first two chapters, we defined crisis communication and discussed some key theories of crisis communication. This chapter builds on these ideas by discussing how to effectively communicate during a crisis. Over the past 30 years, a considerable amount of crisis communication research has been conducted. Some of the more recent research focuses on strategies to help organizations effectively respond to a crisis. This chapter defines key approaches to communicating effectively during a crisis. We believe that an effective response to a crisis has the potential to turn what could be a disaster for an organization into an opportunity to move beyond the event and to learn, grow, prosper, and renew.

This chapter describes 10 lessons for effective crisis communication. These lessons should give any crisis communicator the key elements of an effective crisis response. The lessons, drawn from numerous case studies and research on crisis communication, address several issues. Some of the lessons—such as determining your goals, for example—can usually be accomplished quite quickly and easily. Other lessons, such as managing stakeholder relationships, can be much more complex and time-consuming. You may be surprised by some of the advice we provide in this chapter. For instance, we discuss the importance of using clear, accurate, and direct messages in your initial crisis response. In addition, we provide some advice about overreassuring stakeholders. These lessons may appear somewhat counterintuitive. Nevertheless, research has consistently shown these strategies to be effective means for managing crises.

DETERMINING YOUR GOALS

One of the first things a crisis communicator needs to determine following a crisis is the goal of the crisis response. Goals are often broad statements that can help guide decision making and can connect to the larger values of the organization. One goal of crisis communication can be to reduce the impact of the crisis on those affected. Another goal of the crisis response may be to keep the organization's image intact or maintain the customer base. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) adopted the goals of "be first, be right, be credible" for their crisis communication (CDC, 2014). These broad goals provide clear objectives for how the CDC seeks to communicate during a crisis. In essence, the CDC's objective during a crisis is to establish contact with stakeholders quickly and credibly. Responding quickly can help reduce harm during a crisis. Determining the goals is a key step in preparing for and responding to crisis. Linking these goals to the organization's mission and values can help ensure that the response is in harmony with larger strategies. The larger strategy can also reduce uncertainty for the organization because, once goals are defined, the organization is better able to consciously think about what tactics can be used to accomplish its objectives.

Some of an organization's crisis communication goals may actually contradict one another. For instance, public health departments typically have a key goal of informing the public about health crises. However, at times, they are not able to meet this goal because of individual right-to-privacy laws that prohibit such communication. Determining, ranking, and identifying potential obstacles to goals of crisis communication before a crisis is a key step in effective crisis communication. When organizations prepare for crises, they consider their organizational values and crisis communication goals. In addition, they should collaborate with other groups, work out potential goal conflicts, and establish partnerships.

Lesson 1

Determine your goals for crisis communication.

PARTNERING WITH CRISIS AUDIENCES

We believe that, once goals for a crisis response are established, the second essential part for crisis communicators is developing a mindset about the role of stakeholders in crisis communication. A critical part of effective crisis communication is determined by the relationships organizations have with their stakeholders. Organizations should work before a crisis to cultivate strong partnerships with stakeholders.

We define *partnerships* as follows:

> Partnerships are equal communication relationships with groups or organizations that have an impact on an organization. Partnerships are established through honest and open dialogue about important issues for each group or organization. Partners may be advocates for the organization or they may be groups that are antagonistic toward the organization.

We believe that effective crisis communication starts long before a crisis hits and should be part of every organization's business and strategic plans. Establishing and maintaining equal relationships and partnerships with groups and organizations is critical to effective crisis communication. We do not believe it is appropriate to try to manipulate or deceive stakeholders in a way that gets them to do what you want. Rather, we believe organizations should create a dialogue with stakeholders about important issues and work out equitable solutions. While this can be a time-consuming process, it is essential to crisis preparedness and eventually, an effective crisis response.

We advise organizations to partner with local media when preparing for a crisis. Public health departments, for example, should work with local media before a crisis occurs. As we mentioned earlier, public health departments are charged with providing important health information to the communities they serve. The media are often the outlet for this communication. However, individual right-to-privacy laws often preclude public health departments from being completely transparent in their communication. This limitation can lead to frustration on the part of the media. Through open and honest discussions, public health departments can explain their positions on privacy laws, and the media can share their expectations for public access to information. Our experience suggests that, through these discussions, expectations can be set and uncertainty reduced about how public health departments communicate important health issues and how the media prefer to receive that information. In addition, working out these differences before a crisis improves the chances of an effective response.

Research suggests that the public or an organization's stakeholders can even help an organization move beyond a crisis. Often, the public helps identify a crisis and is very important to resolving a crisis. We have studied many cases of floods, and one of the most important ways to control floodwaters is by building temporary dikes to hold back the water. Building dikes means using sandbags and many volunteers to fill and stack the bags. Fighting a flood requires the cooperation of the public. Almost all infectious disease outbreaks require the help of the public as well. Hand washing, covering sneezes and staying away from others while sick are important actions by the public for controlling disease outbreaks. In the case of the Ebola outbreak in West Africa in 2014 through 2016, the epidemic could not be contained until the public was educated about the disease and how it was spread.

Lesson 2

Before a crisis, develop true, equal partnerships with organizations and groups that are important to the organization.

Lesson 3

Acknowledge your stakeholders, including the media, as partners when managing a crisis.

UNDERSTANDING THE DIVERSITY OF YOUR AUDIENCES

Effective crisis communicators consider the diversity of the audiences they will be in contact with after a crisis rather than viewing them as one large, homogenous public. In Chapter 2, we defined stakeholders as internal or external groups that can have an impact on the organization. A list of possible stakeholders can provide a map of communication partners. Here are some examples:

- Employees
- Competitors
- Creditors
- Consumers
- Government agencies and officials
- The community
- Activist groups
- The environment

- Stockholders
- The media

This list could be even larger, depending on the organization and its interests. To better manage a crisis and our time in preparing for a crisis, we must determine which stakeholders the organization considers primary and secondary.

PRIMARY AND SECONDARY STAKEHOLDERS DEFINED

When considering the diverse nature of a single organization's stakeholders, an understanding of primary and secondary stakeholders is helpful. Heath (1997) explains that this identification of stakeholders must include both "allies-supporters and opponents" (p. 28).

> *Primary stakeholders* are those groups defined by an organization as most important to its success. These are groups that the organization interacts with regularly, like customers, suppliers, and employees.
>
> *Secondary stakeholders* are key groups that do not play an active role in the day-to-day activities of the organization but are still important to its overall success. This may include government agencies or activist groups.

When using the stakeholders to define organizational audiences, we then ask the following questions:

- How often do you communicate with these stakeholders?
- Does this stakeholder have a direct impact on the success of your organization?
- What groups or organizations view you as a stakeholder?
- How often do these groups communicate with you?
- Are you aware of and do you listen to the concerns of these groups?
- On which issues of importance to both primary and secondary stakeholder groups do you agree and disagree?

We find that many organizations are aware of their stakeholders but do not communicate with them, or if they do, the communication is very infrequent. When organizations need to communicate following a crisis, they are often communicating with groups they do not know very well. This lack of familiarity exists, because the organization has not established any prior relationships and has no base for the communication. If an organization does not have a partnership with stakeholders prior to a crisis, the communication following one can be quite awkward and often ineffective.

A crisis is a bad time to make a first acquaintance with an important stakeholder group. Effective crisis communicators listen to their stakeholders and treat their concerns as legitimate, even before a crisis occurs. In this way, effective crisis communicators know the expectations of their stakeholders and their information needs following a crisis.

What is worse than not knowing your stakeholders is having a negative relationship with them. One of the most important concerns for organizations is establishing strong, positive stakeholder relationships. At times, every organization is going to have stakeholders that are antagonistic and maybe even aggressive. That being true, organizations need to follow the classic advice: Keep your friends close and your enemies closer.

Organizations need to work with stakeholders to narrow gaps between stakeholder and organizational expectations. Every organization will need help during a crisis, and generating goodwill with stakeholders prior to a crisis will lessen stakeholder communication demands during and after the crisis. Typically, organizations do not readily address those stakeholders with whom they are in conflict. We believe that communicating with antagonistic stakeholders over time and listening to their concerns is a key to understanding their needs. It can also help the organization understand what kinds of objections and complaints might be raised following a crisis.

To communicate more effectively, organizations must determine the types of communication relationships or partnerships they currently have with primary stakeholders (see Table 3.1). *Positive stakeholder relationships* are defined as both the organization and the stakeholder viewing each other as partners. Neither party may agree on every issue, but both listen to one another and work to create agreements on those issues where they disagree. *Negative stakeholder relationships* develop because of poor communication between the organization and its stakeholders. The organization

Lesson 4

Organizations need to develop strong, positive primary and secondary stakeholder relationships.

TABLE 3.1 ■ Possible Primary and Secondary Stakeholder Relationships or Partnerships

Stakeholder Relationship	Example
Positive	Symmetrical relationship in which both organization and stakeholder understand, acknowledge, communicate, and listen effectively to one another
Negative	An antagonistic relationship between organization and stakeholder; organization is not open to communicating with or listening to the stakeholder group
Ambivalent	No true partnership; organization and stakeholder each work to engineer consent with the other group, but neither group listens to the other
Nonexistent	Organization not aware of stakeholder and does not communicate with or acknowledge the stakeholder group

and the stakeholders distrust and misunderstand one another and may become antagonistic. *Ambivalent stakeholder relationships* are defined as the organization and stakeholders engineering consent with one another. Engineering consent was an idea developed by the public relations practitioner, Edward Bernays. Advertising and public relations can be used to manipulate groups into agreeing or appearing to agree. The relationship illustrates a lack of interest in one another and suggests that one group is trying to control the other. *Nonexistent stakeholder relationships* are defined by a lack of awareness or even acknowledgment of a particular stakeholder group. In this case, the organization and its stakeholders are not even aware that they impact one another.

COMMUNICATING WITH UNDERREPRESENTED GROUPS DURING CRISES

Organizations must also consider the diversity and communication needs of diverse groups of stakeholders during a crisis. These may include members of minority groups based on culture, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation or similar factors, people from different regions or nations, and those with very different values and needs. Particular audiences may have specific communication needs or interests. Current research suggests there are three options in developing crisis messages for underrepresented groups (Dutta, 2007). These options include the following:

- A culture-neutral approach
- A culturally sensitive approach
- A culture-centered approach

A culture-neutral approach takes the position that all stakeholder groups act on and access crisis communication information in similar manners. Crisis communication during Hurricane Katrina illustrates a culture-neutral approach to crisis communication. Crisis communication messages during the hurricane were constructed and presented without thought or concern for the socioeconomic background or crisis communication needs of underrepresented populations in New Orleans. As a result, the needs of these groups were not taken into account or were neglected during the hurricane. Many of the poorest residents were unable to evacuate because they did not have cars.

The culturally sensitive approach to communicating with underrepresented populations suggests that crisis communication messages should be tailored to the cultural characteristics of underrepresented groups to meet their crisis communication needs. For instance, some groups may want crisis information provided by spokespersons from their own cultural group. Others may want information provided at certain locations, such as churches or community gathering places. Still other groups may want crisis messages to contain certain terms or be written at a particular literacy level. The characteristics of each population can vary considerably; however, the goal of the culturally sensitive crisis communicator is to determine the characteristics of the population and develop messages to meet the needs of each group.