Crisis Communication in Organizations

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Crisis communication is a multidisciplinary area of study that encompasses a variety of practices by which organizations communicate before, during, and after crises to bring about a level of normal operations. Ulmer, Sellnow, and Seeger (2015) point out that crises are unique moments that move beyond common, unpleasant calamities, citing Hermann's three distinguishing markers: (1) surprise, exceeds expectations, (2) threat, risk exceeds standard operations, and (3) organizations must respond quickly and effectively. Although many definitions exist, a multidisciplinary approach to understanding an organizational crisis includes acknowledging that a crisis is a high consequence event or series of events of little to no predictability that either really or perceptually threaten the performance or public perception of an organization – consequently causing the organization to engage in sensemaking to reduce uncertainty and restore stability (Coombs, 2014; Ulmer, Sellnow, & Seeger, 2015; Weick & Sutcliffe, 2007). Included in the definition are five components: (1) crises include high consequences for organizational operation and reputation; (2) crises can be a simple or complex event or a series of events that converge; (3) crises are surprises that have by nature little to no predictability; (4) crises really or perceptually threaten performance or public perception; and (5) crises require organizations to engage in a sensemaking process to reduce levels of uncertainty and restore a form of stability that enables organizational life to be sustained.

Many definitions of crisis communication lean toward a transmission based view, focusing on "the collection, processing, and dissemination of information required to address a crisis situation" (Coombs & Holladay, 2010, p. 20). Additionally, crisis communication is usefully viewed as a series of communicative practices and processes that seek to foster safety and organizational stability when normal operations are challenged by crises. Crisis communication in organizations is part of the larger interdisciplinary field of disaster response and emergency management that includes organizational communication, public relations and strategic communication, issues management, organizational rhetoric, crisis management, and management science disciplines. The plurality of the disciplines converges in the investigation of best practices in the complex organizational ecologies of organizational crises.

It is commonly accepted that a return to a precrisis normal operational status is not always achievable. Thus, reaching a form of operational stability or a new normal is a more accomplishable result for successful crisis communication. Chaos theory has been suggested as one explanatory framework for crises and how they alter the normal operations of organizations (Seeger, 2002). As such, chaos theory introduces the premise that

nonlinear and unexpected organizational interactions precipitate in the need for self-organization (i.e., order). For example, during and after Hurricane Katrina, the impact of the hurricane itself was devastating; however, the natural disaster exposed a series of weaknesses in disaster response and preparedness at all of levels of government in the United States, uncovered underlying racial tensions, and revealed poor crisis leadership practices. Although some of the ramifications of Katrina are still present, organizations, as a result of the chaos, had to reevaluate policies, preparedness, prevention, and response practices. Across the globe organizational crises challenge the DNA of organizational life, ranging from working conditions in the 2013 Rana Plaza factory collapse in Bangladesh to poor leadership and risk assessment in the 2010 Deepwater Horizon oil spill, and from data breaches in the 2014 hacking of Sony Pictures to reputational crises in the 2012 Foxconn labor conditions controversy in China.

Whether disease outbreaks, sabotage, economic downturns, data breaches, food contamination, workplace violence, strikes, or accidents, crises can take on a life of their own that supersedes categorization. The social and constructed nature of crises adds a layer of complexity that moves beyond cause and effect to discursive and material interactions in the moment with implications for organizational sustainability. Crisis communication practitioners navigate these complexities through communication processes – seeking to build momentum and motivation through chaos.

Crisis communication stages and typologies

The study of crisis communication in organizations is grounded in taxonomies that assist scholars, practitioners, and the general public in understanding stages and types of crises. Coombs (2007) identifies highly influential stage models for crisis management effectiveness by Fink and Mitroff. However, many crisis communication scholars use a three-stage model, (1) precrisis, (2) crisis, and (3) postcrisis, which corresponds with Turner's (1976) six stages: (1) normal operations, (2) crisis incubation, (3) precipitating event, (4) onset of crisis, (5) rescue and salvage, and (6) readjustment of belief system (see Ulmer, Sellnow, & Seeger, 2015). In the *precrisis stage* organizations should seek out potential threats, establish prevention models and practices, develop management plans and procedures, build healthy relationships with stakeholders, and prepare through simulations and other forms of training. This stage is foundational for effective crisis management and communication. Similarly, Stein (2004) frames stages as (1) incubation, (2) critical, and (3) aftermath, and describes the transition from incubation, or precrisis, to critical, or crisis event, as the *trigger event*. Stage models place emphasis on the buildup to the crisis. Thus, understanding the event that triggered the crisis is essential; however, it is equally critical to understand the ripple effects that occur during the critical stage of a crisis. Simply, a crisis can foster other crises that can have equal or greater impact on organizations. As a result, how leaders communicate during the crisis about risk, strategy, sensemaking, and responsibility becomes a major part of the study of organizational crisis communication. Consequently, organizational crisis communication encompasses internal communication about risks and crises as well as external communication with stakeholders throughout these stages.

Generally, *risk communication* is considered a part of effective crisis communication, and refers to attempts made by organizations to mitigate crises by building understanding of risk and safety before crises occur in addition to communicating the risks that can emerge in the fluid nature of crises. Risk communication is featured in the *crisis and emergency risk communication* (CERC) stage model (Reynolds & Seeger, 2005). The first of CERC's stages is precrisis, in which organizations monitor, warn, and communicate about risks. The precrisis stage is followed by the initial event, maintenance, resolution, and evaluation. Although the CERC model is similar to other models, its practice based recommendations in each of the stages provide a framework for crisis planning, response, communication, and evaluation for practitioners.

Both crisis and risk communication are a central part of organizational vitality across all crisis stages. In the *crisis event stage* Coombs (2007) argues that crisis recognition and containment are two quintessential subsets of crisis communication in organizations. If organizational members do not recognize and respond to a crisis as a crisis, it will be difficult to manage. Thus, crisis communication practitioners and managers need to assist members as well as stakeholders in crisis identification and response. Once the crisis is effectively recognized, the organization can move forward in containing the crisis with effective response practices. In the *postcrisis stage* organizations must look back at the crisis buildup, management, and effects to prevent future crises of a similar nature as well as repair reputational and material damage in order to restore organizational stability and move forward.

In addition to the recognition of stages, scholars provide practitioners with a broad *typology of crises* in order to help elucidate how response practices will diverge across the variance of crisis types and situations. Although responses across crises of the same type are not identical, a typology provides a systematic process by which to prepare and respond to potential crises. The typologies vary, but a key commonality exists across categorizing crises into human-made versus natural. Human-made crises tend to be intentional or accidental. *Intentional human-made crises* are associated with acts that incorporate intent to harm and include terrorist attacks, violent crimes committed at work, sabotage, embezzlement, and other white-collar crimes. *Accidental human-made crises* include unintentional circumstances such as product recalls, food contamination, technological failures, economic crises, and job related injuries. Unlike human-made crises that arise from intentional or unintentional human actions, *natural crises* are acts of nature including but not limited to flooding, mudslides, fires, tornadoes, and hurricanes. Identifying stage and crisis type assists crisis analysis and response.

Mitroff and Anagnos (2001) offer a slightly different crisis typology through the categories, or families, of economic, informational, physical (facility related), human resource, reputational, psychopathic act, and natural disaster. From their perspective, these families of crisis types permit organizations to prepare crisis management plans for at least one crisis within a family, thus enhancing the organization's capabilities to respond to crises within that family. For example, if a food manufacturing organization prepared for a loss of key facilities within the physical family, then the organization should be better prepared for other physical crises such as breakdowns of key equipment or major plant disruptions.

Crisis communication processes

Systematically explaining and studying crisis communication is examined using a variety of approaches, some of which are reviewed in subsequent sections. A central part of crisis communication is the safety of actors involved in and influenced by the crisis. Actors are commonly known as stakeholders. *Stakeholder theory* accentuates the complex relationships and responsibilities of organizations to internal and external stakeholders. The theory identifies primary and secondary stakeholders for which precrisis communication may enable advocacy, resources, and political support; but during a crisis, stakeholders may be negatively affected, thus underscoring the need for effective crisis communication (Ulmer, 2001). As a result, communicating with those stakeholders about their respective safety is critical. *Safety* is the practice of minimizing risks in the least amount of time. Even though safety is a paramount concern in crisis communication theories, it is often an underlying assumption, while emphasis focuses more on other key organizational communication processes: (1) decision making processes, (2) risk awareness and management processes, (3) crisis and emergency response processes, and (4) outcomes and processes of renewal.

Decision making processes

Decision making can include a variety of organizational activities such as crisis planning and strategizing, risk assessment, running crisis simulations, and training organizational members. During a crisis, decision making processes may be complicated by the magnitude of the crisis and the degree of organizational preparedness. As such, *sensemaking* becomes an essential process within crisis communication practices. Weick's (1995) work examines the enacted nature of making sense of highly equivocal environments. Through taking action toward an outcome, actors can retrospectively make sense of the situation. Enactment comprises using recipes or mental models, and selecting models that lead to the best possible outcome. As retrospective sense is made of actions taken, new recipes are constructed for future enactment. In turn, actors become as complex as their highly equivocal environments. Learning, not just as an individual but as a collective, is a part of navigating through these environments.

Organizational learning should be an ongoing and reflexive process of seeking, noticing, and documenting feedback in order to implement change. Scholars agree that failures, especially minor failures or near failures, are important windows into the organization that can garner the organization's attention and generate meaningful organizational action (Weick & Sutcliffe, 2007). Almost clearing a plane for takeoff when another plane had not vacated the runway should be an attention getting potential crisis for an air traffic controller and should generate a series of questions and answers as to how to prevent something like that from ever occurring. Organizations learn from their own failures and more general experiences, but they can also vicariously learn from other organizations (Sellnow & Seeger, 2013). As such, organizations should be aware of other organizational crises, especially those of competitors, to integrate lessons learned into the organization, bolster crisis planning, and make effective decisions.

Further contributing to organization decision making, *situational crisis communication theory* (SCCT) is a predictive, rather than descriptive, model that anticipates stakeholder responses to a crisis based on reputational threats. In doing so, SCCT suggests appropriate crisis communication strategies to protect organizational reputation. Coombs (2007) proposes that initial crisis responsibility, crisis history, and prior relational reputation interactively construct the reputational threat to the organization during a crisis. Drawing on attribution theory, Coombs argues that stakeholders will attribute responsibility for a crisis, which is why organizations need to anticipate stakeholder attributions. Responsibility falls within three categories: (1) organization as the victim, (2) organization as experiencing accident, and (3) organization as culpable. The greater the responsibility or culpability stakeholders attribute to the organization, the greater the need for the organization to accept responsibility and respond to stakeholders' safety and psychological needs. According to SCCT, organizations may evoke one or more of four postures: deny, diminish, rebuild, or bolster. To deny is to deny crisis responsibility, and it is recommended that the crisis manager or organizational leader provide stakeholders with the responsible party. To diminish is to downplay the crisis and its effects as well as minimize organization responsibility. To rebuild is to accept public responsibility for the crisis and its effects and offer an apology. To bolster is to accentuate the positive history of the organization to its stakeholders. SCCT relies on evidence based strategy development, unlike other image related crisis communication approaches like image restoration theory.

At the center of SCCT is initial crisis responsibility, and it is responsibility that accentuates organizational ethics and the role they play in crisis communication. Ethics undergird decision making and can be often overlooked because of the chaotic nature of crises. Yet, as Sellnow and Seeger (2013) point out, ethical issues and questions arise in most crisis situations. Whether it is in relation to victimization, justice, responsibility, causality, motive, or who is to blame, ethics play a significant role in making informed choices, communicating with stakeholders, and developing future crisis plans. Ethics involve applying moral standards to assess what is right or wrong, good or bad, just or unjust, or desirable or undesirable. Although organizational members make ethical decisions daily, crises may draw out ethical dilemmas that would otherwise remain hidden in the minutia of daily operations. However, to operate in a humanitarian and compassionate manner, organizations must make decisions about how members communicate risks, facts, perceptions, and imagery, all of which have the potential to stereotype, evade privacy, jump to conclusions, or cause some other form of harm. With regard to ethics, organizations must carefully tread how they communicate ambiguity during a crisis as they may be tempted or pressured to provide specific information or to speculate. Sellnow and Seeger (2013) summarize five ethical frameworks that inform crisis communication practices and should assist organizations in ethical dilemmas: (1) responsible communication, (2) significant choice, (3) ethic of care, (4) virtue ethics, and (5) justice.

Risk awareness and management processes

Crisis communication processes include risk awareness and management processes that have been heavily influenced by both management science (i.e., normal accident theory and high reliability theory) and emergency management (i.e., warning systems) scholarship. Perrow's (1999) normal accident theory argues that highly complex environments are by nature accident prone. Simply, ecologies where interactive complexity (unexpected events are not always clear) and tight coupling (high interdependence) exist will experience normal accidents where the system outputs are paused or limited. Technology creates these breakdowns in the system. Weick and colleagues argue that these types of organizations must operate reliably. *High reliability organization* (HRO) literature has contributed to risk mitigation and crisis response. HROs operate nearly error free in high risk environments (Weick & Roberts, 1993), subsequently functioning as models of reliable organizing. Scholars have studied a variety of HROs including nuclear aircraft carriers, wildland firefighters, police units, urban search and rescue task forces, and emergency rooms. In extant research, the crux of reliability has been explained through *collective mind*, which Weick and Sutcliffe (2007) argue can be applied to all organizations to enhance organizational reliability and crisis response by providing risk awareness before, during, and after crisis. However, the essence of collective mind is to prevent failure regardless of the complexities present within organizing processes. Mindfulness is conceived of in terms of its opposite – heedless, unquestioned habits. When heedful operation is coupled with interrelatedness, or collective action, organizations can operate in a highly reliable way. Collective mind is operationalized through five processes: (1) preoccupation with failure, (2) sensitivity to operations, (3) reluctance to simplify interpretations, (4) commitment to resilience, and (5) deference to expertise. When organizational actors simultaneously enact these five mindful processes, they are constituting a collective mind that is able to anticipate risk, mitigate emerging risks, and respond to crises with resilience and expertise. Finally, a noted strength of HRO work resides in the recognition of improvisation within organizational crisis decision making and engagement to navigate risks. Improvisation displays how experts are capable of adhering to organizational scripts and deviating from those scripts in innovative and effective ways that do not disrupt organizational flow and enable response in order to overcome or avoid risk.

For organizations to avoid, mitigate, and communicate about risks, risk assessment is a valuable tool. Risk assessment methodologies and modeling vary from formalized procedures and computerized modeling to less formalized procedures. Nevertheless, risks threaten organizational normalcy. How organizations communicate risks through *warnings* before, during, and after a crisis can influence decision making about threat response. Example warning systems for the general public in the United States include the Emergency Alert System (a television and radio broadcast system) and the former Homeland Security Advisory System (a color coded terrorist threat warning system). On a smaller scale, organizations may have internal warning systems such as email, text message, and other mediated means to communicate threats. For example, following the 2007 Virginia Tech school shooting, colleges and universities nationwide in the United States assessed their vulnerabilities to an active shooter and developed

crisis management strategies and warning systems in the event of an active shooter on their campuses. Using various software programming, some schools, colleges, and universities employ text and phone alerts in addition to outdoor sirens and announcements to provide warnings. Scholars have sought to explain how to best warn stakeholders about risks and determined that credible, clear, and consistent warning messages are most likely to be perceived and acted upon by receivers (Sellnow & Seeger, 2013). Lindell, Prater, and Perry's (2007) work with risk communication identifies eight warning stages and corresponding outcomes. Warning stages include (1) risk identification, (2) risk assessment, (3) searching for protective action, (4) protective action assessment subsuming self-efficacy, safety, and timing, (5) protective action implementation, (6) information needs assessment, (7) communication action assessment, and (8) communication action implementation. Communicating risk with stakeholders may be more effective with clear, accurate, timely, and expert information about risk and corresponding protective actions; however, there are other message factors that may affect risk communication, especially culture. Thus, risk communication should also evaluate the cultural appropriateness of risk messages and proposed protective actions (Aldoory, 2010).

Crisis and emergency response processes

Organizations not only make sense of, learn from, and communicate about risks, but also communicatively respond to the crisis event and its aftermath. *Organizational rhetoric* features organizational representatives, usually leaders, constructing messages about the organization's role in the crisis, and is primarily studied with regard to crisis and postcrisis communication (Sellnow & Seeger, 2013; Ulmer, Sellnow, & Seeger, 2009). Dependency on stakeholders necessitates organizational crisis responses to image if the organization is to resume a new normal with its stakeholders. To introduce image restoration theory, attention should turn to *apologia*. As a focus in rhetorical analysis, apologia was applied to corporations by Dionisopolous and Vibbert (1988), who identified four self-defense strategies of crisis communication: (1) denial, (2) bolstering, (3) differentiation, and (4) transcendence. *Corporate apologia* paved the way for crisis communication research and practices to concentrate on issues of organizational reputation or image and social legitimacy (Coombs et al., 2010). Related theoretical extensions include Hearit's (1995) work with corporate social legitimacy crisis theory, and Rowland and Jerome's (2004) work with apologia including image maintenance strategies: demonstrating concern for the victims, bolstering organizational values, denying intent to do harm, and preventing recurrence.

Similarly, Brinson and Benoit (1999) extend corporate apologia research through five *image restoration strategies* relevant to organizational crisis communication: (1) denial, (2) evasion of responsibility, (3) offensiveness reduction, (4) corrective action, and (5) mortification. Three out of the five image restoration strategies are further specified: (a) denial may be simple denial of responsibility or more complex blame shifting; (b) evasion may include provocation, feasibility, accident, and good intentions; and (c) offensiveness reduction may include bolstering, minimization, differentiation, transcendence, attack the accuser, and compensation. Scholars have applied image restoration theory to a number of notable cases including Texaco's public allegations of racism,

Firestone's blame shifting campaign, Saudi Arabia's post-9/11 messages, and British Petroleum's response to the Deepwater Horizon oil spill. Critiques and extensions of image restoration theory have transitioned the theory from primarily descriptive to prescriptive as well as suggesting best practices for crisis communication practitioners (Dardis & Haigh, 2009).

Corporate social responsibility (CSR) is an ethic of responsibility evidenced in organizational culture, policy, and resource allocation to the financial, social, political, and/or environmental enhancement of the organization, community, and stakeholders. Common examples of CSR may include reducing the organization's environmental imprint and charitable giving. Although CSR research is not typically the focal point of crisis communication inquiries or that of practitioners, CSR has a valuable role to play in stakeholders' perceptions of the organization and is, thus, related to image management.

While image management concerns may pervade crisis and emergency response, issues management is a broader set of concerns related to crisis related issues. Often a subset of public relations within organizational communication, *issues management* is the study of how organizations name, define, and influence issues and public opinion of them. Within issues management, organizational representatives utilize public argumentation to achieve organizational goals in response to crises. Different perspectives come to bear on issues management but, particularly, Kuhn (1997), drawing on structuration theory, demonstrates how the genre of issues management discourse constructs rules for organizational communication and, thus, provides organizational representatives with socially appropriate scripts to situations.

From an organizational communication perspective, *crisis leadership* is an opportunity to manage meaning and enact communication competencies during the stages of a crisis. Crisis leadership avails itself of opportunities with regard to organizational rhetoric, image management, issues management, and CSR. Overall, open, honest, ethical, flexible, and specific communication during crises by organizational leaders is recommended to facilitate collaboration and positive outcomes. Although it is difficult to delineate a comprehensive list of crisis leadership best practices, poor crisis leadership exacerbates crises and their aftermath. Yet, as seen during the aftermath of September 11, 2001, leaders such as Mayor Rudy Giuliani proved to build trust and calm the fears of the public by being seen frequently in the vicinity of the site of the attacks on the World Trade Center in New York. Effective crisis leadership practices communicate stability and provide vision for a path toward that stability.

Outcomes and processes of renewal

Postcrisis communication processes not only seek to establish a plan toward hope and understanding the effect of a crisis, but also are key to understanding outcomes that lead to organizational stability, success, and renewal. The *discourse of renewal* is positioned to frame crises with regard to organizational image, learning, and change. In terms of organizational image, image restoration is a postcrisis communication organizational effort to positively affect stakeholder perceptions of the organization. Next, postcrisis discourse may frame crises as critical learning events in the history of the organization. Finally, postcrisis discourse may renew by shifting the typical retrospective discourse

to the future, reconstituting the organization, responding provisionally with the perception of authenticity, and affirming the voice and vision of organizational leadership (Seeger et al., 2005). Discourses of renewal demonstrate that from destruction and difficulty can emerge learning, a new normal, and opportunities for change.

Future directions in research, theory, and methodology

Weick and Sutcliffe (2007) argue organizations that operate routinely in crises or for whom crises are a part of their mission – and who do so in a highly reliable way – offer lenses by which other organizations can learn to manage the unexpected nature of crises. Equally, how all organizations prepare for and respond to crises affords fertile ground for the expansion of understanding effective crisis communication practices and processes. Because of the interdisciplinary nature of crisis communication and its influences, future directions may be quite diverse, but the focus assumed in this section centers on what organizational communication scholars can contribute to crisis communication in organizations. Though the following is not exhaustive, it does illuminate several lines of inquiry that would extend crisis communication research, theory, and methodology.

First, the communicative constitution of organizations (CCO) movement within organizational communication offers several unique possibilities: contradiction and paradox within crisis communication decision making, response, and renewal; authority and power in relationship to crisis communication practices; membership negotiation challenges from crises; centrality of coordinated activity within response practices; embedded nature of conflict within crises; ventriloquism of crisis policy and planning to enable and/or constrain crisis communication; scaling up and scaling down of crisis communication; and constitutive entanglement of materiality and discourse of crises and related organizational communication practices. Second, organizational communication scholars provide a unique lens through which to examine emotion within crisis situations. Although some scholars have examined emotions in emergency response organizations (Myers, 2005; Scott & Myers, 2005) as well as professional responses to organizational tragedies, further examination of emotion within stakeholder perceptions, attribution of responsibility (Miller, 2002), and legitimacy gap would extend applied knowledge for practitioners addressing the complexity of emotions. Third, organizational communication scholarship should explore fear and security pertaining to the prevalence of terrorist organizations and other intentional means of violence toward or by organizational members. More specifically, inquiry should address microinteractions within organizations and how security measures might create a greater sense of fear or a false sense of security. How do organizational policies get framed as fear and/or security inducing?

Fourth, organization communication scholars should consider the terra firma of interactions among team members and employ methodologies like network analysis or other perspectives like that of the Montreal School. Such work would elucidate group-level crisis communication within organizations. Fifth, discourse methodologies and practice perspectives within organizational communication scholarship would be

relevant in the further study of body, sites, and objects and complex organizational environments. These methodologies and related theories offer new and unique angles for crisis communication and foreground the significance of materiality in crises. Sixth, communities of practice research within organizational communication scholarship has relied heavily on structuration theory, but communities of practice research may forge ahead within crisis communication research to diversify theories applied to communities of practice and include the examination of civilian emergency response teams (CERTs), organizational crisis simulations (i.e., table talks), and interorganizational emergency response.

SEE ALSO: Ambiguity; Apologies; Change, Organizational; Communication and Terrorist Organizations; Communicative Constitution of Organizations; Communities of Practice; Contradictions, Tensions, Paradoxes, and Dialectics; Corporate Communication; Decision Making Processes in Organizations; Discourse Analysis/Methods; Environment; Ethics; Frame/Framing; Groups and Teams in Organizations; High Reliability Organizations; Jamming; Innovation; Interorganizational Communication; Issue Management; Learning Organization; Management; Public Relations; Reputation; Risk Communication; Sensemaking; Strategic Communication; Trust; Uncertainty; Whistle-Blowing

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Abstract

Crisis communication is a multidisciplinary area of study that has generated a variety of best practices and processes by which organizations communicate before, during, and after crises. Crisis communication scholarship has generated definitions of crisis and risk, crisis stages, and useful typologies and taxonomies. Various communication processes are related to crisis preparation and response – including decision making processes, risk awareness and management processes, crisis and emergency response processes, and outcomes and processes of renewal. Theories and best practices seek to foster crisis communication strategies that maintain and develop healthy stakeholder relationships, understand image and reputational assets, establish effective crisis leadership, and address other key functions for practitioners.

Keywords

crisis communication; crisis leadership; decision making; high reliability organizations; image restoration theory; issues management; risk communication; situation crisis communication theory; stakeholders and image restoration; stakeholder theory