

## **An Analysis of Team Effectiveness in Crisis Communication**

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### **Abstract**

*No country, company or organization is immune to crisis. Being able to effectively respond in the event of a crisis is relevant to an organizations survival. Meticulously planned crisis communication strategies not only enable organizations to recover from the aftermath of a shock wave but also benefit from the analysis of the dangers and draw consequences for future actions. Corporations with efficient crisis communication teams are able to effectively communicate and respond in the event of a crisis. This paper sets out to analyze several team-related factors that may influence an organization's crisis communication response.*

**Key words:** Team, crisis, organization, communication

### **1.1 Introduction**

In The Handbook of Crisis Communication Coombs defines a crisis as “the perception of an event that threatens important experiences of stakeholders and can impact the organization’s performances” (2010, p. 100). In other words, a crisis occurs when a company’s reputation is in jeopardy. A reputation is an evaluation of an organization formed by its stakeholders, who in turn are the people who are affected by or can affect an organization (Mitchell et al, 2007). Reputation is therefore a valuable asset and important to protect. A tarnished reputation may drive away customers and as a direct effect the company will suffer the consequences often made blatant by the bottom line (Coombs, 2007).

Although there is no one accepted definition of a crisis, a few generic things can be said about the concept. Firstly, a crisis is perceptual. This means that a crisis is defined by the perceptions held about it. Stakeholders perceive crises in a certain way and it is the organization’s job to adjust its crisis communication to their beliefs. Secondly, a crisis is unpredictable. This is nevertheless not the same as being unexpected. A crisis can be anticipated, and intelligent companies are aware of the potential crises in the offing. Thirdly, crises disturb stakeholder expectations, and finally, it is important to distinguish between crises and incidents. An incident is “a minor, localized disruption”. A crisis “disrupts the entire organization” (Coombs, 1999, p. 3). In other words, the difference between the two has to do with how much damage they cause. A crisis will always have serious impact and should naturally be taken more seriously than an incident (Coombs, 1999).

In the event of a crisis, an organization must have formal guidelines and procedures for communicating to employees, as well as the general public. Several scholars including Fearn-Banks (1996), stress the importance of corporations developing and implementing effective crisis management and communication plans. Citing corporate cases, Fearn-Banks outlines to the reader how various organizations were either proactive or reactive in the event of a crisis. Along those lines, Coombs (1999) also reinforces the significance of crisis planning by focusing upon important issues, such as detection, prevention, preparation, recognition, containment, and recovery. Finally, Barton (2001) suggests today’s organizational leaders must be able to recognize, anticipate, manage, and formally prepare for crisis.

## 1.2 Literature review

### Benoit's Image Restoration Strategy

William L. Benoit talks about the concept Image Restoration Strategies. According to him “human beings engage in recurrent patterns of communicative behavior designed to reduce, redress, or avoid damage to their reputation” (1995, vii). Being able to rectify a wrongdoing is crucial for private persons as well as companies. The ability to repair a reputation is important not only for the sake of ourselves, but also the people surrounding us, seeing as most people care about whether others think positively about them and recognize a reputation as a valuable asset (Coombs, 2007). A bad reputation can interfere with our interaction with others. Image restoration saturates our everyday life, and it is therefore important to explore the concept (1995, vii).

When people feel the risk of losing face or having their image tarnished, the trigger response is to offer some sort of response to save reputation. The response can take many forms. Benoit recognizes several types, three of which are: accounts, apologies and excuses (1995). An account can both admit and evade guilt according to how it is constructed. The account in itself is merely a description of the events. The second type of response, the apology, is often used and may at first glance look like the most harmless strategy given its air of benevolence. Benoit states “it is possible for those who commit wrongful acts to attempt to repair their reputation with a sincere apology” (1995, p. 4). However, the strategy does have drawbacks. Giving an apology is not necessarily the same as taking responsibility. Sometimes an organization apologizes as an act to show stakeholders sympathy but not to take the blame (Pace, Fediuk & Botero, 2010). Determining whether the apology attributes responsibility or not is often seen in the use of active (responsible) or passive (sympathetic) voice (2010). Another potential drawback by admitting fault is the invitation of lawsuits from victims, which can cause a major economical setback if the wrongdoing is connected to a company (Benoit, 1997, p. 182). In connection with the apology, Benoit's strategy “corrective action” should be mentioned. This strategy is connected to apologizing, seeing as the accused in this instance also admits the wrongdoing. The difference is that the accused through this strategy attempts to reduce the offense by taking action to correct the wrongdoing. This can be done by either reimbursing victims financially or compensating them. Another possibility, which companies often choose, is to attempt to restore the state of affairs before the offense occurred (Benoit, 1997, p. 181; Benoit, 1995, p. 6).

Finally, there is the response in the form of an excuse. The excuse can take the form of defeasibility, where the accused claims to have had a lack of information about or control over important elements of the situation. Another possibility is to try and convince the audience that the wrongdoing was a result of good intentions and not inflicted intentionally. What the excuses all have in common is that they are an expression of evasion of responsibility. This strategy should naturally only be employed, if in fact the excuse is truthful and the accused was not directly at fault (Benoit, 1997, p. 180). Nevertheless, it is not a favorable strategy in general. Stephens et al call it “the distance strategy”, which seeks to sever linkages between the accused and the crisis (2005). It is difficult to form an excuse that follows the advice Benoit found to be effective in image restoration discourse: “avoid making false claims; provide adequate support for claims, develop themes throughout a campaign; avoid arguments that may backfire.” (Benoit, 1997, p. 183). Especially the advice regarding adequate support and avoiding arguments that may backfire can prove to be difficult to fulfill, for companies particularly, as it would require the accused to have a complete view of prior conflict history and be aware of every pitfall that could occur in connection with the accusation.

In addition to these three strategies, there is the strategy of denial. This strategy has been isolated due to the fact that, although it is a probable response, it is not an attempt at explanation or justification. Denying a wrongdoing entirely leaves the blame to be placed elsewhere. This strategy, if used profoundly, can eradicate the risk of the accused reputation being damaged. Nevertheless, if used dishonestly, the consequences can be very grave, seeing as the accused will then be deemed both guilty of the wrongdoing and lying about it. “Denial can be supplemented with explanations of apparently damaging facts and scapegoating.” says Benoit, and is usually an easy strategy to spot because of omitted actions or blame placing (1995, p. 2-3). A response type that can be viewed as an active alternative to denial is the attack. Sometimes the accused chooses to point towards a new target to place blame on, in other examples the attack directs itself to the accusation and attempts to undermine its validity. The attack often employs negative commentary and adjectives in order to damage credibility and induce doubt (1995, p. 3).

There exists no one correct response to all crises. The response is entirely dependable on the earlier mentioned crisis types and how key facets of the situation influence attributions and reputations perceived by stakeholders. In turn, understanding the situation type can inform the post-crisis communication. The Situation Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) provides a framework for this (Coombs, 2007).

### **Situational Crisis Communication Theory**

Situational crisis communication theory is one of the most dominant and recognized theories within the field of crisis communication. The theory “provides an evidence-based framework for understanding how to maximize the reputational protection afforded by post-crisis communication” (Coombs, 2007, p. 163). It evolves around the examination of a crisis situation and how certain factors determine the level of reputational threat existing in an organizational crisis. There are three factors that shape the level of threat: initial crisis responsibility, crisis history and prior relational reputation. Initial crisis responsibility is one of the central concepts within crisis communication research. The theory posits that stakeholders attribute responsibility for the crisis and thereby how it is framed. This idea is closely connected to crisis origin, which refers to whether a crisis commenced from an internal organizational issue or an external source. The different types of crisis origin affect the attribution of responsibility and, thus, the available crisis communication strategies (Jin et al, 2011). The level of responsibility attributed to the organization is especially important, as it will determine the role it has in a crisis. Another variable is the actor in the crisis. Depending on whether the central actor is human or nature, internal or external, individual or grouped the crisis can be predicted to develop in certain ways and communication strategies can be designed accordingly (Jin et al, 2011; Coombs et al, 2010; Cho & Gower, 2006). Research also shows that the more responsibility an organization is attributed during a crisis, the higher the reputational threat will be (Cho & Gower 2006; Coombs 2007).

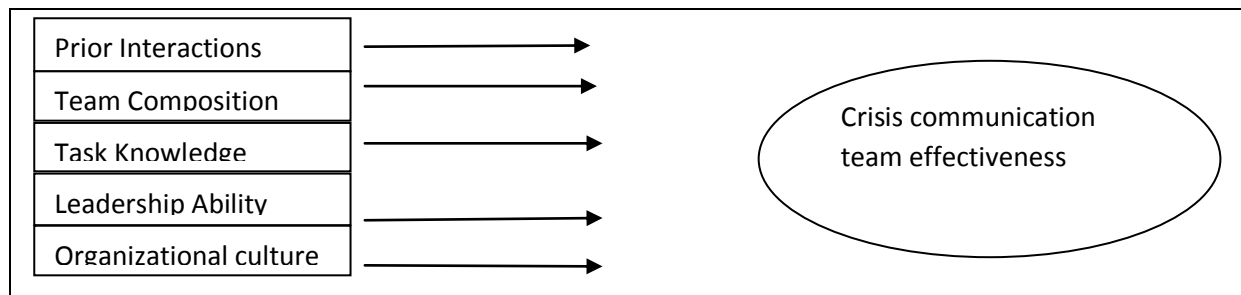
### **1.3 Discussion**

The use of teams within organizations has become standard practice among leading corporations today (Devine et al., 1999). Companies have found several advantages of using teams, for example, a team generates more information, stimulates creativity, and encourages agreement with important decisions (Beebe and Masterson, 2000). On the other hand, there are also disadvantages to using teams within a corporation, for example, working in teams cost time, energy and resources, conflict can occur, pressure to conform (groupthink) (Mullen et al., 1994), member domination, and a lack of individual responsibility (Beebe and Masterson, 2000; Engleberg and Wynn, 2000). Although teams and groups are perceived as synonymous terms, researchers have indicated they are not the same. For example, according to Barker et al. (2001), a group is “merely a collection of individuals”. A group may reside within an organisation, a club, a family, or among friends. On the other hand, a team has been defined as “a coordinated group of individuals organised to work together to achieve a specific common goal”. (Beebe and Masterson, 2000). Likewise, other researchers claim a team to be composed of a group of people “given full responsibility and resources for their performance” (Engleberg and Wynn, 2000,). Finally, Lumsden and Lumsden (2000) perceive a team as consisting of a group of people that “develop special feelings among its members, creates critical work processes, and reflects leadership for its own development performance”.

Surveying these definitions, certain characteristics appear to be prevalent among teams. First, a team is a diverse group of people with different backgrounds, abilities, and knowledge levels to accomplish a specific task. Second, members of a team work to achieve agreed upon goal. This task is accomplished by team members communicating and arriving at a consensus on how to achieve the desired goal. Finally, team members create a self-identity or self-image that becomes a cohesive and motivating force for its members (Lumsden and Lumsden, 2000). In other words, some team members are able to motivate other group members based upon their actions, attitudes, and behaviors. Crisis communication members may function as a team within an organisation. In order to cope successfully with a crisis, team members must work hard and skilfully use relevant information and procedures at their disposal. Team members must feel and act as members of an effective team (Tjovsold, 1995). Scholars have suggested various individual and team-related factors may enhance the efficiency and effectiveness of a team (Hirokawa and Keyton, 1995; Klimoski and Jones, 1995).

For example, “an individual’s capacity to perform effectively on a team will be related to such things as the pattern of his or her specific aptitudes general abilities (especially verbal intelligence), and individual and task-specific team abilities”(Klimoski and Jones).

Whether or not a team is effective will also depend upon the team's organization (that is the division of labour and authority among group members), norms (that is, formal and informal rules of conduct that groups develop to regulate their members' behaviour), composition (that is, a group characteristics such as task related abilities, values, and needs of team members, and individual difference variables relating to age, gender race), leadership that is, method of influencing team outcomes through direct and indirect interpersonal means) and size (that is the number of members to actively participate on a task) (Klimoski and Jones). Evidence indicates clearly that not all teams are effective (Hiroka and Keyton, 1995). Placing people in a group and asking them to perform a task does not mean they will effectively perform the specific task. Various factors can influence the efficiency and effectiveness of a team, for example, insufficient time, information resources, procedural conflict, poor group leadership, uninterested and unmotivated members, no organisational assistance, no financial compensation, and changing organizational expectations (Hirokawa and Keyton). Other factors may also influence a team's effectiveness, for example, prior interactions, team composition, task knowledge, leadership ability, and the organization's culture (Figure 1).



**Figure 1. Factors which may influence team effectiveness in crisis communication.**

Prior interactions, or group familiarity, may influence the effectiveness of a crisis communication team. Researches have suggested team members familiar with one another's skills, perspectives, and interpersonal styles might display a freer, more open format of communication among group members (Wittenbaum and Stasser, 1996). From a crisis management perspective, this freer, open-style of communication might enhance the overall effectiveness of a crisis team. Researchers found: Familiar group members were more comfortable disagreeing with one another than groups whose members were unacquainted and were, therefore, forming first impressions during the task. The greater the number of familiar members in a group, the more comfortable they were expressing disagreement, the more open they were to learning from one another, the more they enjoyed working together, and the greater their satisfaction with outcomes (Gruenfeld et al., 1996). Therefore from a crisis communication perspective, one can assume:

Proposition one: Crisis communication teams (CCT) composed of members with prior interactions may be more likely to generate and share ideas with one another than CCT whose members know less about one another.

A second factor that may plague crisis communication teams is homogeneity. Homogeneity refers to the extent to which group members are similar in values, psychological make-up, communication style, race, gender, attitudes, beliefs, abilities, skills, decision-making, and task relevant information (Salazar, 1996, 1997). Heterogeneity, on the other hand, refers to the extent to which diversity among group members involving issues such as personality, values, attitudes, abilities, skills, race, gender, decision-making, communication style, and belief are held as important factors in reference to team composition. Research has suggested that homogeneous groups do not perform as well as heterogeneous groups. According to Shaw (1976), "groups composed of members having diverse, relevant abilities performed more effectively than groups composed of members having similar abilities". The reason for this is because homogeneous groups are typically less goal and task oriented, which leads to unrealistic and poor team decision-making.

On the other hand, heterogeneity promotes the opportunity for diverse opinions and attitudes, freedom of expression, and better decision-making by the members (Gouran and Fisher, 1984). Therefore, from a crisis communication perspective, one can assume:

Proposition Two: Crisis communication team (CCT) whose members are heterogeneous may be more likely to generate better ideas than teams whose members are homogeneous.

Another component that may influence the effectiveness of a crisis communication team is knowledge of the task. We can assume that task knowledge would perform a significant role in whether a crisis communication team is effective. Team members, who are aware of some of the key components of effective crisis communication, may enhance the team's decision-making in the event of a crisis. Researchers have found that prior knowledge and information held by group members before a discussion, influenced decision-making effectiveness among group members. For example, Larson et al. (1994) found that information shared by group members prior to a discussion encouraged the dialogue between group members. According to Larson et al., the exposure of information prior to and during a discussion, may make it easier for group members to recall information as well as verify the accuracy of information. In a similar study, Stasser et al. (1989) found that information known beforehand would encourage the discussion and dialogue among team members.

From a crisis communication perspective, one can assume that teams with prior knowledge may be more effective in making a decision than teams without prior knowledge. Devine (1999) claims cognitive ability and task knowledge are important when the task has a high degree of complexity and a high-level of decision-making among team members. Thus, based upon this information, proposition three suggests:

Proposition Three: Crisis communication teams (CCT) whose members are knowledgeable of the task at hand may be more likely to generate better ideas than members who are not knowledgeable of the task.

A fourth factor that may influence the effectiveness of a crisis communication team is the style of leadership. Whether or not an organization is successful in handling a crisis may depend upon the ability of the team leader to manage the diverse behaviors of the group members and the company's employees. The crisis leader must possess and demonstrate strong interpersonal skills, which will motivate team members and employees to work towards the organization's goals. Furthermore, the team leader must be able to emotionally inspire self-confidence in all group members, along with employees that the organization will return to a state of normalcy. Such a team leader must possess a style of charisma that displays loyalty and confidence to the organization and its members.

Organizational researchers have successfully linked charismatic leadership with crisis management. For example, Pillai (1996) found that under crisis situations, charismatic leadership appeared to be more effective and prevalent than in non-crisis conditions. In a similar study, House et al. (1991) suggests that "charismatic leadership is required, or at least is more appropriate, in situations that require a combination of highly involved and active leadership plus emotional commitment and extraordinary effort by both leader and followers in pursuit of ideological goals". Finally, Gibson et al. (2000) note under conditions of a crisis, charismatic leadership is likely to emerge. In this situation, a leader is given the power to do what is necessary to solve the crisis. Such tactics might include empowering followers, contacting outside agencies, or directly eliminating the crisis. Thus crisis communication teams (CCT) whose leader demonstrates a charismatic style of leadership may be more effective in controlling and eliminating an organizational crisis.

Finally, a fifth factor that may influence the effectiveness of a crisis communication team is the organization's culture. The culture of an organization performs a pivotal role in the event of a crisis. Whether or not an organization returns to business as usual may depend upon the organization's culture.

Researchers have defined an organizational culture as "what the employees perceive and how this perception creates a pattern of belief, values, and expectations"(Gibson et al., 2000). Along those same lines, Clappitt (2001) defines a culture as "the underlying believe and value structure of an organisation collectively shared by the employees that is symbolically expressed in a variety of overt and subtle ways". Schein (1985) perceives a culture as consisting of assumptions and beliefs that are communicated and shared by members of an organization. In the event of a crisis, the values, beliefs, and assumptions held by members of a corporation may affect the organization's return to normal operation. Some organizations perceive crisis communication as futile and not a necessary requirement. This line of thinking may be a result of the current senior officials operating within the organization, or basic beliefs and assumptions that have been carried down from generation to generation. Such faulty rationalizations may cost the organization huge financial loss, as well as place the organization's future in jeopardy. Researchers (Pauchant and Mitroff, 1992) have suggested that some organizations fall victim to self-inflicted cultures. That is, some employees within the organization take on self-inflated behaviors described as "dramatic, authoritarian, and grandiose".

Individuals with self-inflated behaviors are often perceived as interpersonally exploitive, taking advantage of others, developing a sense of self-importance, exaggerating their achievements and talents, being preoccupied with fantasies of unlimited success, power, or brilliance, and requiring constant attention and admiration from others. They lack empathy, often being unable to recognize or experience the feelings of others, and they have no tolerance for the frustration of delayed gratification. In the event of a crisis, senior officials, managers, and other employees who suffer with this line of thinking, often react very strongly to a crisis. Members of an organization with self-inflated behaviors may display feelings of shame, rage, and humiliation during a crisis (Pauchant and Mitroff). In fact, the crisis communication team might be viewed as incompetent, negligent, and worthless. As such, the success and effectiveness of the crisis communication team might be hampered. Therefore, one can assume that Crisis communication teams (CCT) are less likely to be effective if the culture of the organization does not support crisis planning. In light of these propositions, various ethical concerns of a crisis team also come into play.

This paper has examined various prepositions that may enhance the effectiveness of a crisis communication team. Although it is impossible to prepare for all accidents, it is the organization's responsibility to properly prepare for those that may occur. According to Coombs and Holladay, responsibility, in reference to crisis communication, refers to the degree to which stakeholders feel the organization is accountable for the accident, and the company's return to a state of normal operation. In this case, organizations that hedge or deny responsibility for an accident may cause the crisis not only to escalate, but damage stakeholders interests in the organization (Ray, 1999). The significance of the crisis communication team cannot be underestimated. The team's composition and their ethical behavior all perform a vital role in controlling and eliminating a crisis. Along with the crisis team, all senior officials, managers, staff, and employees must do their part to support the team's efforts and the organization.

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