

The Handbook of Crisis  
Communication

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**WILEY-BLACKWELL**

A John Wiley & Sons, Ltd., Publication

Oxford England

## What is a Public Relations “Crisis?” Refocusing Crisis Research

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Recently, Ki and Khang (2005) reported the results of a bibliometric study of public relations research. Their data indicate that the study of crisis has consistently been one of the three biggest areas of study in public relations for nearly 20 years. *Public Relations Review* alone has published more than 130 articles over the last 25 years that deal with crisis. And, for several years now, members of the public relations division of the National Communication Association (NCA) have joked about splitting off into a separate “crisis division.”

As a recent NCA program planner, I can attest to the ubiquity of interest in crisis. In 2006, two NCA panels were devoted to crisis. In 2007, three panels were devoted to crisis. In 2008, two panels and a number of papers were devoted to public relations crisis. And, at the recent Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication’s (AEJMC) 2008 conference, two high-density panels were devoted to crisis.

If we examine the organizational focus of crisis articles, several key issues stand out. First, we discover that nearly every conference paper and article implicitly or explicitly treats crisis from the standpoint of the organization rather than from the standpoint of the organization’s stakeholders. Second, how we define crisis necessarily privileges the organization and privileges the study of reactionary tactics rather than proactive communication. And third, although many heuristics have been developed for examining crises *post hoc*, almost no one can provide tangible advice to practitioners about which crisis strategies are more valuable than others or which strategies work best in different industries or under different circumstances. Most of the crisis strategies that have been studied presuppose large, corporate-style organizations, rather than small or medium-sized organizations that often do not have abundant media access or resources.

## What's in a Definition?

Issues one and two are related: nearly every conference paper and article written on crisis implicitly or explicitly treats crisis from the standpoint of the organization rather than from the standpoint of the organization's stakeholders. Consider some recent examples from *Public Relations Review*:

- "When sorry is not enough: Archbishop Cardinal Bernard Law's image restoration strategies in the statement on sexual abuse of minors by clergy" (Kauffman 2008).
- "Contingency, conflict, crisis: Strategy selection of religious public relations professionals" (Shin in press).
- "Information subsidies and agenda-building during the Israel-Lebanon crisis" (Sweetser & Brown in press).
- "From aspiring presidential candidate to accidental racist? An analysis of Senator George Allen's image repair during his 2006 reelection campaign" (Liu in press).
- "The elephant in the room is awake and takes things personally: The North Korean nuclear threat and the general public's estimation of American diplomacy" (Hwang & Cameron 2008).
- "Consumer health crisis management: Apple's crisis responsibility for iPod-related hearing loss" (Park in press).

In each case the essay deals with reputational and media communication issues, but not with substantive crisis issues associated with internal or external stakeholders.

Some might argue that "public relations professionals work for clients and organizations, and so it makes sense that the focus of their public relations efforts would be centered around meeting organizational needs." But a focus on the organization just ignores the fact that genuine organizational crises have broad implications for a variety of stakeholders, including customers, employees, suppliers, and competitors (cf. Heath & Coombs 2006). Most introductory public relations textbooks suggest that public relations professionals should be concerned with multiple "stakeholders," yet most crisis research also takes the easy route of examining the crisis from only one perspective.

Consider several common definitions of crisis. According to Coombs (1999: 2-3), crises are *unpredictable* and represent threats to organizations. Coombs cites several other definitions of crisis, noting the following:

- "a major occurrence with a potentially negative outcome affecting an organization, company, or industry, as well as its publics, products, services, or good-name";
- "a major unpredictable event that has potentially negative results. The event and its aftermath may significantly damage an organization and its employees, products, services, financial condition, and reputation" (p. 2).

Indeed, in a recent article entitled "Protecting organization reputations during a crisis: The development and application of situational crisis communication theory," Coombs (2007) argues that a crisis is a sudden and unexpected event that threatens to disrupt an organization's operations and poses both a financial and a reputational threat. Crises can harm stakeholders physically, emotionally, and/or financially. A wide array of stakeholders is adversely affected by a crisis, including community members, employees, customers, suppliers, and stockholders (Coombs 2007).

The title of Coombs' essay belies the definition. In spite of the fact that crises have wide-ranging effects, researchers and scholars tend to focus exclusively on the organization's external communication. Although Coombs (2007: 165) writes: "It would be irresponsible to begin crisis communication by focusing on the organization's reputation. To be ethical, crisis managers must begin their efforts by using communication to address the physical and psychological concerns of the victims," he continues: "It is only after this foundation is established that crisis managers should turn their attentions to reputational assets."

Where is the research examining "the physical and psychological concerns of the victims" or *any* stakeholder outside of the organization itself? In each of the recent articles mentioned above, and in so many others, the unspoken assumption is that crisis is used to help individuals and organizations "manage their communication" (a definition of public relations), rather than manage a "crisis" and its impact on the organization and on multiple stakeholders. Definitions of crisis as causing physical or psychological harm imply that crises have broad implications. So where is the research on these broad implications? When corporate scandals break, like the CEO of HP (Patricia C. Dunn) getting caught bugging her colleagues, many scholars call such incidents "crises." Yet, very little actual financial, reputational, or organizational risk actually exists. Definitionally, then, such incidents are not "crises," any more than Bernard Law's image (Kauffman 2008) is a crisis for the Catholic Church, or a Batmobile toy poking out a few kids' eyes is a crisis for Mattell (Taylor & Kent 2007a). The focus on natural disasters, product recalls, catastrophic incidents, and so on, rather than on more mundane events such as employee layoffs or moving manufacturing plants overseas, implies (and the crisis research would seem to bear this out) that crises are things that happen to celebrities, corporations, and their leaders rather than to stakeholders.

When the crisis research spotlight remains fixed on the organization, no light will ever be cast on the stakeholders. In spite of the fact that many definitions of public relations mention potential harm to stakeholders, in practice, almost all public relations crisis research focuses on the organization. When Blaney, Benoit, and Brazeal (2002), for example, write about Firestone's tire crisis, they assert:

The problems faced by Bridgestone-Firestone in this crisis were twofold:

- 1 Bridgestone-Firestone manufactured a product that cost hundreds of lives in the United States and Venezuela, and

- 2 Bridgestone-Firestone concealed knowledge of the defects from the public for 3 years, only admitting to the problems after numerous reports of fatalities. (2002: 382)

The Firestone crisis is described as purely an organizational issue. In fact, the crisis was that millions of people were still driving around on unsafe tires, *not only* that people had died. The deaths were a *foreseeable* result of Firestone's negligence. Similarly, the crisis was *not* that Firestone concealed knowledge of fatalities but that the organizational climate was so dysfunctional and corrupt that Firestone's leaders were incapable of dealing with the real crisis effectively. Crisis research needs to move beyond the myopic focus on external communication to the media and organizations' immediate problems, and instead branch out to include a variety of stakeholders apart from the organization.

### A Crisis for Whom?

The second issue, "how we define crisis," is essential for moving the field ahead. As noted previously, what we often call a crisis is often a crisis for organizational leaders rather than an organizational crisis. For example, Zatepilina (2008), in a recent AEJMC conference paper, wrote about the failure of Iraqi contractors to respond to allegations of wrongdoing. Zatepilina examined the contractors' message strategies (apologia) and discovered that the contractors typically refused to comment on allegations of wrongdoing and never apologized. "And why would they?" I asked her. "If the media are not holding their feet to the fire, is there even a crisis?"

The inability to actually define a crisis is not trivial. Definitions are what academics and professionals turn to in order to make decisions about where to devote scarce resources.

How we define "crisis" needs to be examined. An organization laying off thousands of employees is often described as a "crisis," and yet, from the standpoint of the organization, laying off thousands of employees will allow the organization to "better compete." Thus, from the organization's standpoint, how is a layoff a crisis? Since employee layoffs often happen when an organization shifts its manufacturing overseas, or moves its production to less costly locations, layoffs constitute hundreds or thousands of individual "stakeholder crises," or a *union* crisis, but not an organizational crisis. So, does this mean that public relations professionals should not consider the implications of crises like layoffs on employees or consider how to minimize the stakeholder consequences? Of course not. However, our definition of crisis needs to change, or what we study needs to be expanded, before scholars can broaden their approach to crisis research.

An exploration of definitional issues will help advance the study of crisis communication. If public relations is really a profession that cares about a variety of

stakeholders, our responsibility to them, as well as our relationship to the media, governmental regulators, and so on, needs to be clarified. Crisis is much more than “a major occurrence with a potentially negative outcome” or “a major unpredictable event that has potentially negative results” (Coombs 1999: 2). True crises often define the future actions of organizations, how organizations relate to their external environments, and they have long-lasting implications for organizational climate and profitability.

Arguably, most communication professionals will never need to employ any of the many crisis communication strategies (e.g., apologia), since so few organizations actually experience reputational crises. What is perhaps more important to understand is the cyclical process of issues and crises (cf. Coombs 1999), and how crises are often used strategically (ethically and unethically) to advance organizational goals (cf. Taylor & Kent 2007b; Veil & Kent in press).

### A Focus on Heuristics

There are nearly as many different forms of crises as there are publics. As suggested earlier, an event that is a crisis for one public is not necessarily a crisis for another. Crises range from malfeasance by corporate officers to natural disasters, from equipment failures to labor strikes, from faulty products to tainted ingredients, from employee layoffs to factory closings. Additionally, as suggested above, many crises (such as layoffs) are only crises for individuals and organizational stakeholders rather than organizational crises. Thus, knowing how Intel, Firestone, AT&T, or Swissair handled *their* crises is not nearly as important as knowing which crisis strategies are culturally bound, whether there are regional, educational, or economic differences in how individuals or publics respond to crises, how important the relationship between an organization and its publics is to weathering crises, and so on.

The third issue, examining the heuristics that are more strategically useful, is an area that is only now beginning to receive some attention. Since all crisis responses are rhetorical, how organization X handles a crisis is less relevant than how organizations X, Y, and Z, under *similar* circumstances, handled *similar* crises. Although knowing that there are dozens of potential crisis response strategies is helpful, understanding that none of them work in every situation is more helpful. Understanding situational and audience constraints is a form of “genre analysis,” a method that goes back more than 50 years (cf. Kent & Taylor 2007).

Dozens of post-crisis critiques of organizations’ “crisis response strategies” have been conducted, but little research has examined which strategies work best in specific situations or industries. Apologia, for example, is a genre that has received considerable attention; however, almost no one has examined the concept cross-culturally to explain how “apologies” are handled in different cultures or nations

(cf. Taylor 2000). Genre analysis looks for similarities in discourse across social and cultural settings. Thus, weddings, funerals, inaugural addresses, and the like are communicative genres that have consistent features and audience expectations. Through genre analysis and techniques like meta-analysis or methodological triangulation, we may discover that reputational crises share a number of similar features and that publics respond in similar ways.

Given the number of US organizations that operate across national borders, understanding how various cultural orientations influence perceptions of crisis seems a logical approach. Apologies (and what counts as an apology) are not used the same way in Bosnia, China, Germany, Israel, Japan, Russia, or the United States. Similarly, finding answers to questions like “what difference does the educational level of the audience, the ubiquity of crisis messages, the reputation of the organization or communicator, or the channel make?” will serve to make crisis theories more robust.

By taking a generic approach and broadening the way that we study crises, discovering crisis response heuristics may become possible. Additionally, until other issues such as organizational and national culture, organizational reputation, organizational type, message timing, media coverage, and so on are considered, all of the many crisis critiques that have been conducted will remain mere anecdotes, instructive but not predictive.

## Conclusion and Directions for the Future

The study of crisis communication in public relations still needs to evolve. The focus of much of the current and previous research has been on *post hoc* analysis of crisis communication, rather than identifying how theory can inform practice or understanding how organizations can avoid crisis in the first place (issues management, organizational communication, and so on). Additionally, many texts and articles on crisis myopically treat it as an organization-based phenomenon, ignoring the impact of crisis on organizational stakeholders.

In many ways, the study of crisis has become a tool for managing corporate reputation rather than a tool for making organizations stronger. The naïve premise that public relations is a neutral informational tool is past its shelf life. The challenges facing organizations and citizens need to be managed by finding ways to avoid crisis in the first place (crisis planning, issues management), by dealing with *all* stakeholders when crises occur (relational approaches, dialogic approaches), and by being able to provide more substantive recommendations for how to employ crisis communication strategies (generic approaches).

Organizational crises are often assumed to be economic or reputational problems rather than ethical or systemic problems. The “good organization behaving well,” as Quintilian might have held, is what public relations professionals should be working toward, rather than how to restore a tarnished reputation, or working

to make people forget what an organization did rather than owning up to the crisis and fixing the problem (cf. Veil & Kent in press).

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