

Internal Communication – Essential Component of Crisis Communication

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Abstract: *In “normal”, day-to-day circumstances, internal communication is vital to the proper functioning of an organization. For the effective management of crisis situations its role is all the more so. Indeed, the lack of accurate, adequate, timely and fluent information during a crisis dramatically affects the trust people have in their own organization, thus endangering the commitment they should show in cooperating to crisis resolution. Meanwhile, the lack of accurate information could determine organization members to be open to rumors – one of the enormous threats in times of crisis – as well as to circulating defeatist declarations.*

This is how a crisis situation affecting one or more organizations becomes dangerous not only due to the apparent consequences it produces (victims, breakdowns, damages, losses, serious threats to the organizational structure, dramatic changes of the organizational purposes, goals and strategies etc.), not only due to its media impact, but also because of the negative influence to their own personnel’s morale, efficiency and capability of intervention, as a result of inadequate communication. At the same time, the limited concern to accurately, adequately and timely inform own organizational members adulterates their quality as image multipliers: instead of taking action as carriers of positive image to organizational stakeholders, they will – to a greater or lesser extent – make their worries, doubts, fears and suspicions, as well as rumors coming from collateral sources public. All of these factors affect organizational credibility, and credibility is exactly what constitutes one of the most important assets to be used in crisis management.

Organization members thus ought to preferably find out about a crisis from internal sources. However, because of the unpredictable progress of a crisis, chances are that mass media will gain primacy to internal information. Even then, the organizational management must be aware of the need to rapidly, accurately and satisfactorily communicate with own members and to apply the plan previously prepared in this respect.

Keywords: *organizational crisis, crisis communication, internal communication, internal publics, crisis communication plan*

I. The need for coherent communication in crisis situations – introductory remarks

In order to successfully prevent and/or resolve organizational crises, practical expertise has attested the effectiveness of properly managed communication. As such, the phrase “crisis communication”, which describes a valuable tool in crisis resolution and requires thorough prior planning, has been established for a long time in the organizational management. The importance given to crisis communication thus represents an important rationale supporting the assertion that a crisis is first of all “a *perception* of an unpredictable event that threatens important expectancies of stakeholders and can seriously impact an organization’s performance and generate negative outcomes” (Coombs, 2007, 2).

Coombs stresses the need for a proactive approach in order to adequately manage public perception. As such, crisis communication can be described as “the dialog between the organization and its public prior to, during, and after the negative occurrence. The dialog details strategies and tactics that are designed to minimize damage to the image of the organization” (Fearn-Banks, 2007, 9).

Indeed, in its practical work, a diligent organization applies this kind of communication not only during the crisis event, but well before it comes up, as well as after it ends. This is actually an essential aspect of a proactive and interactive approach to crisis communication: crisis communication is visible not only during the crisis event, when it shows its reactive attributes, but all along the organizational life cycle (pre-crisis, crisis, post-crisis).

Crisis communication has been viewed as the cornerstone of public relations (Popescu, 2002, 84). *Transparency*, consisting in providing as complete, clear and precise information as possible, represents a critical feature of crisis communication, no matter the publics being addressed. “The lack of transparency can favor the birth and spreading of rumors and false information in the media. The media sideslip in these circumstances is unavoidable. Hence the decrease of [organizational] credibility/prestige” (Popescu, 2002, 84).

Crisis communication must fulfill at least two functions:

- First, it must allow the smooth transfer of information required for a viable crisis management. The process is dual and it boils down to the proper communication between the crisis management team (CMT) members, as well as between CMT members and the organization (smooth internal communication), experts, and other parties involved in crisis resolution;
- Last, but not least, crisis communication must guarantee as less organizational image damage as possible. It must maintain the organization's reputation and credibility. This is where we need to stress once again the importance of internal communication, whose crucial aim is to preserve own members' trust and loyalty. Media relations, as well as stakeholder communication, are also included in the effort of maintaining organizational reputation. Actually, should this process be suitably managed, the organization may eventually come out of the crisis with a better reputation than before (Fearn-Banks, 2007, 9-10).

II. The need for internal communication in crisis situations – theoretical approach

From a theoretical point of view, the importance of internal communication during crises has been admitted and accepted. However, one is inclined to ignore it in real life because of an exaggerated media attention (Libaert, 2008, 102). As a matter of fact, it should receive at least the same consideration as is given to media communication (Montague, 2006, 22). The main reason supporting this claim is that internal publics will behave like external ones if they do not have the sentiment of belonging “to the interior”.

Internal communication is crucial in crisis situations as it is able to provide *cohesion* and *coherence* to the organization involved (Moore, Seymour, 2005, p. 82). These requirements are particularly decisive nowadays, when organizations may spread on wide geographical areas with undefined borders, and employ members based in various locations and socio-cultural contexts.

Generally, internal communication within an organization has, among others, the effect of preventing individual and/or collective negative emotions as insecurity, fear, anger or embarrassment (Cohn, 2000, 282) from surfacing. In crisis situations, the lack of internal communication and consequently the danger of such feelings arising are essentially risky. From here to a fragile organizational stability, the distance is short.

In ordinary times, internal communication corresponds to a vital need for the proper performance of an organization; its role is far greater in the effective management of crisis situations. According to expert opinions (Lukaszewski, 2000, vol. II, 1.2), internal communication is key to the success of the crisis resolution process: the most effective support needed by the respective organization can come from the employees themselves, former members or their families, provided that they are given

appropriate information and become aware of the fact that they represent a part of the solution. The same expert draws attention on a frequent managerial mistake as far as crisis resolution is concerned: although employees represent one of the most important audience segments, they are often ignored; or, even worse, the management erroneously assumes that they would become involved in the crisis resolution process without hesitation, doing everything they are told or required to.

Instead, the lack of accurate, adequate, timely and coherent information during a crisis affects the trust people have in their own organization dramatically, thus weakening the commitment they should show in crisis resolution efforts. Moreover, the scarcity of consistent information may determine the organization members to become more open to rumors – one of the greatest dangers during crises – as well as to spreading defeatist declarations; Czarnecki (2007, 93) believes that one of the fundamental rationales behind internal communication consists in avoiding the gap between the unusually high interest of staff members eager to find out what is going on and the small amount of information being disseminated by the organization. This gap inevitably generates rumors.

This is why, while confronting a crisis situation, organizations should also be able to manage the additional risk resulting from the lack of control over the “noise” produced by own members’ performance and/or affirmations. Organizations should, for instance, tackle both unfounded assertions made by employees as they are contacted by journalists, and the staff’s frustration when noticing that they get more information from acquaintances or mass media than from their own organization (Lukaszewski, 2000, vol. IV, 8.2). This is what some experts (Libaert, 2008, 102) call the *managerial aspect* of internal crisis communication: Its aim to maintain members’ motivation by giving them information “right from the source”.

Indeed, just like the other stakeholders, employees have really high expectations from their organization in times of crisis. Members of an organization confronting with a difficult situation expect it to provide protection, show concern for their lives, prove sympathy and sensitivity for their own worries; a great deal of these expectations may be fulfilled if the organization proves to be communicative, if it tells them what is going on timely, what is to happen, when the difficulties will end. Contrarily, if the organization does not communicate, the employees will do the talking for it, using information they got from other sources and perceptions they produced based on it (Lukaszewski, 2000, vol. II, ix).

If crisis situations come up as a consequence of incidents/accidents affecting people’s physical integrity, communicating with the most affected people – victims and their families – with a human touch (best described through empathy and sympathy), in a fast and effective manner represents a very important strategic goal of internal crisis communication; moreover, aside from the human touch needed in reaching out to those affected, communication efforts are meant to lower media attention and consequently the coverage of the unfortunate event. It will also consolidate the trust

of the local community, public opinion, officials, and – very important – employees (Lukaszewski, 2005, vol. III, 2.2).

On the other hand, effective internal communication during crises aims to preserve own members' trust and loyalty. More than that, it may even enhance previous positive results as far as the management of employee attitudes is concerned. Indeed, employees are not owners or even holders of the organization's assets and products, so that they would have any apparent interest in protecting them; instead, they manifest attitudes, which may be hostile or favorable to the organizational processes. These attitudes, if properly cultivated by means of internal communication measures, can be preserved or even enhanced with the help of crisis communication (Lukaszewski, 2000, vol. I, 6.9).

The crisis communication elements are also useful when tackling or at least keeping under control potentially harmful events, such as personnel downsizing, resource rationalization, work negotiations or service interruptions caused by strikes (Lukaszewski, 2000, vol. I, 6.11).

In cases with legal implications, when the organization or its members are involved in trials, there are also important internal communication actions which maintain internal trust and perhaps even a certain psychological balance as the trial goes on. Periodical briefings must take place to inform key managers on the legal process: how the trial procedures are developing, who the players are, what the most appropriate legal vocabulary is, what trends arise, which the next steps to be taken are, which legal aspects should be communicated to the staff so that the message remains consistent. These steps should be made in close cooperation with legal counselors or lawyers, according to their expert advice (Lukaszewski, 2000, vol. I, 7.20).

Finally, if top-to-bottom communication channels are very useful to the proper functioning of an organization, bottom-to-top communication is needed as well, particularly in times of crises. Undeniably, ascending communication gives managers an important feedback that they do not completely get from staff members and middle managers who act as filters in vertical communication, either ascending or descending (Cohn, 2000, 293-294).

It is thus advisable for organization members to find out about crises from internal sources, which will preserve or even enhance organizational credibility in the eyes of its own people. However, given the unpredictable character of a crisis, chances are that mass media gain primacy in internal information as well. Even so, organizational management must be aware of the need to promptly, adequately, and accurately communicate with organization members, as well as to apply the previously prepared internal communication plan.

III. Internal crisis communication – a checklist for practitioners

Internal crisis communication must be characterized by *honesty* and *openness* (Regester, Larkin, 1998, 198). To these two essential features, we would also add *appropriateness* (timely information) and *completeness* (provision of all the information needed by the members of an organization facing a crisis).

Among the practical actions meant to guarantee the success of internal crisis communication, experts (mainly Lukaszewski, 2005, vol. III, 2.3-2.4) suggest:

- Briefing members on the situation as soon as possible. Whenever it is achievable, briefing should take place before details of the crisis get into the media. This would ensure that members are provided with accurate and exact information, and the influence of potential distortions unavoidable in media reports is avoided.
- The organization will consequently be able to avoid questions – entirely justified questions – like: “What is going on here?”; “What are they trying to hide?”; “Why do I have to find out about this from media and/or acquaintances?”; “Who is taking care of us?”; “How will things end?”
- Accurate briefing of members must be consistent and observe the correspondence between words and facts. “One of the most dangerous practices is preaching one thing and doing another”, asserts Robin Cohn (2000, 295).
- Compatibility of internal and external messages. Information released inside the organization must be as factual and accurate as the one released to external publics, particularly to the media (opinion also shared by Huff, 2008, 181). Even if the manner of communication is less formal than the one used for the external publics, the staff must be given the same references. Even more so, compatibility is needed since a piece of information distributed to an internal public does not necessarily warranty that the message will “remain inside”, but in turn will most probably become public (Montague, 2006, 22).
- All members must be given the same information. Even if adapted to the specifics of each receiving group, information must be compatible across the organization and be free of contradictions and discrepancies between what some members know and what others have learned.
- Members should be insistently, but politely advised to direct all requests for information and questions to the spokesperson – at least during crises, if they were not advised to do so earlier: “Let me put you in contact with the spokesperson of our organization, who should have the most accurate and appropriate information on the matter” (this is an approach also suggested by Regester, Larkin, 1998, 198). This should definitely not lead to the idea that members are forced to keep silent (imposing silence is totally unproductive in such cases), but that they wish to direct inquiries to the most accurate and credible information source.
- If members have not been trained or at least warned on polite ways to direct inquiries to the spokesperson, there is a danger that those being approached for information give answers like: “We are not allowed to talk to the media” or “I would gladly answer your question, but I’m afraid not to get fired.” This type of reaction does not contribute to the reduction of crisis related problems, but gives them additional inflammation.

- When briefing organization members, face-to-face communication is the best method. Even if “the big bosses” will not be available every time, the managers and supervisors on various organizational levels can do that. Direct communication is extremely credible and appropriate followed by the distribution or posting of a memo with the latest developments. Studies (Cohn, 2000, 290-291) show indeed that members prefer to get information: first, from their immediate supervisors, then from small group meetings, top executives, and finally from media or grapevine; as one can easily see, direct communication is the most preferred. This is why internal briefings are a frequent way of communicating with members during a crisis; they should be scheduled either at the beginning of the daily routine (the beginning of a shift, for instance), or whenever new facts come into play (Czarnecki, 2007, 93); internal briefings are also a good opportunity to thank those who contribute to crisis containment, as well as to respond questions.
- Face-to-face discussions are also helpful, as they encourage bilateral communication, thus reducing the “grapevine effect.” This effect largely contributes to the distortion of representations on process developments.
- Whenever and wherever possible, members have to be encouraged to resume activity and go about their usual, “normal” business. Often, not all of the organization’s members take part in the resolution of a crisis. They are thus not forced to give up their daily routines in order to take actions specific to crisis containment. Those who are not directly involved in crisis management have to be encouraged to get on with their normal activity so that the economic impact of the crisis is diminished. Most importantly, this will also help reduce the unfavorable media impact in the aftermath of the crisis manifested by a growing appetite for reporting disorders and functional perturbations produced by the unfortunate event.
- Compassion is unquestionably valuable in maintaining the psychological comfort of members. When unexpected, mostly negative, explosive developments come up within the organizational space, some of the workmates may be affected, injured, threatened or even killed and material damage may be consistent. There may also be consequences of natural disasters or acts of extreme violence, and public perceptions may be threatening or at least unfavorable.
- These factors may heavily challenge the emotional balance of the members of an organization going through a crisis; moreover, in such circumstances, “emotions overtake reason” (Cohn, 2000, 290). Therefore, understanding the staff’s emotional state is important.
- If possible, the management should allow the activation of a toll-free telephone line for employees where they will be able to confidentially express their confusions and concerns, and get confirmation of the management’s compassion. Sometimes, particularly when there are victims involved, even individual or group counseling sessions may be useful (*debriefing sessions*, see Coombs, 2007, 136), as well as private talks with spiritual leaders like priests, for instance. Furthermore, right after the crisis, *defusing sessions* are suggested (Coombs, 2007, 136) to provide

members with a general behavioral framework that will enable them to favorably leave behind the stress generated by the crisis. At the same time, members should be encouraged to perceive the resolution of the problem as a shared responsibility of the organization and their own (Regester, Larkin, 1998, 198).

- Members' contribution to the resolution of the crisis must be recognized and appreciated. The other members must find out about the contribution of those involved in crisis management, as well as about the gratitude expressed for their involvement.
- There needs to be a feeling of continuity perceivable throughout the whole process. Members should clearly observe that restoration after the crisis is constantly improving and it is an ongoing concern. The propensity of management to stop communication as soon as public attention tends to decrease must be categorically avoided, as it will certainly produce a loss of credibility. Moreover, the tendency (otherwise natural) to make forgotten what has just happened may have negative, long-lasting effects on members' and their families' morale (Regester, Larkin, 1998, 200): some of them will remain deeply and for a long time affected by the events; others will succumb to the pressure and leave. This may not happen because of brighter professional perspectives elsewhere, but merely out of fear that unfortunate events will reoccur; others might eventually experience and show great resentment against the organization, even if the organization itself is not accountable.
- Therefore, the organization must effectively communicate with its own members during the post-crisis stage, providing them with specialized counseling if needed and trying to redirect accumulated anger and frustrations toward a positive direction (for instance, toward the commitment to find out safety and security solutions able to eliminate the probability of new workplace accidents).
- A key person in the organization must permanently be seen as being in charge and responsive until the problem gets solved. The presence of a person taking on managerial responsibility is crucial to maintaining and strengthening the trust in the organization throughout the crisis. Her presence may also help diminish collateral damage, which might be induced by the perception that the process is inappropriately or not at all managed.

A remarkably atypical method of interactively involving members in internal crisis communication consists in *employee certification* (Curtis, 2007, 12): during pre-crisis, in accordance with their professional and communicational achievements, certain employees may be selected and trained to operate as "communication allies"; In compliance with organizational specifics, certain communicational standards may be set up for the selected members, as well as certain training procedures regarding communication matters, the regularity of

training, the testing procedure that will assess their communication abilities and competences within the required framework, the regularity of re-certification or un-certification methods etc. During a crisis, these allies will enhance the organization's messages both in the internal and external environment. They can also get training on how to deal with either specific scenarios or just any crisis situation that may challenge the organization.

In conjunction with these "communication allies" on the inside, one may also involve external *professional communicators belonging to the local community*. They should be previously identified, mentioned in the crisis communication plan and briefed on the organization's specifics (Thenell, 2004, 56).

Accordingly, when it comes to internal communication, Fernandez and Merzer (2003, p. 153) suggest *inviting external experts* able to fill members in on the potential risks and the most effective measures and procedures to be adopted. Expert involvement will also make a contribution to the organization's success in crisis containment and/or resolution.

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