Effective Communication in Crisis Situations

Assoc. Prof. **Cosmin IRIMIEŞ, PhD**

Babes-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania
Email: cosmin.irimies@fspac.ro

Abstract: *Communication has become, in the contemporary geo-strategic settlement, one of the most important issues both for professionals and for ordinary people as well, and by professionals we mean not only public relations specialists, campaign leaders and researchers, but also any person in a leading position no matter what type of organization we refer to. Under these circumstances, mastering effective communication represents an essential element of public life especially when there is any type of crisis involved.*

Keywords: *effective communication, crisis, strategy, speech, public, audience, argumentation.*

Before commencing any attempt to design or analyze a crisis communication campaign from the point of view of its effectiveness, we should define crisis and crisis situations: what they are, how they emerge, which are the actors and the possible evolutions, what steps have to be made in order to overcome the crisis and subsequently which is the role of communication in all this construction.

The theoretical coverage of crisis situations is extremely wide, thus offering us a variety of definitions. According to Jonathan Bernstein (2013), crisis can be any situation that is threatening or could threaten to harm people or property, seriously interrupt business, significantly damage reputation and/or negatively impact the bottom line (Bernstein 2013).

Timothy Coombs (2015) on the other hand, considers that crisis is a perceptual situation and "if stakeholders believe an organization is in crisis, a crisis does ex-

ist, and stakeholders will react to the organization as if the organization is in crisis" (Coombs, 2015).

Crises themselves disturb some stakeholder expectations as people become upset and angry, which threatens the relationship between the organization and its stakeholders. That is why crises are considered dangerous to organizations' reputations"(Barton, 2001), being events that dramatically interrupt the current activity of an organization and that have a negative influence on its public image (Coman 2001). Other scholars on the contrary approach crisis as an opportunity to detect errors, escape routines and accelerate change, develop new strategies and increase competitiveness (Chiciudean & David 2011).

Apart from the specific issues they raise we can see that all definitions approach crisis as an unexpected, unplanned and overwhelming situation that can shake the natural order of things within an organization's environment, be it internal or external, through uncertainty, confusion and lack of control.

Scholars differentiate various types of crisis taking into consideration different factors involved and different criteria like ways of expression (Mitroff & Anagnos 2001), practical utility (Coombs 2015), fields of influence (Libaert 2008).

In what the emergence of crisis is concerned, scholars distinguish between two major types of crisis: sudden crisis and that explodes at a certain moment, apparently out of nowhere, and slow-burning crises that intensify gradually giving effective managers the necessary time to develop and conduct crisis management plans.

Once emerged, any crisis has to be dealt with step by step and as it never does extinguish by itself, nor does it pass without structural changes. The global approach to structuring crisis proposes three major phases: pre-crisis, crisis and post-crisis, all actions being designed according to the specific context, actors and implications for each of these stages. One of the more comprising models in approaching a crisis situation is the one in five stages (Fearn-Banks 2015) that distinguishes among:

1. signal detection
2. probing and prevention
3. damage containment
4. recovery
5. learning.

We think though that reducing the stages of evolution of crises to so few steps may be comprising, but not specific enough, as crises and their evolution are much more subtle and need to be approached as such.

When we look at a crisis situation from the global three-stage perspective, we must detect more levels at least in the pre-crisis phase in which we would include the first level of the latter model that is detecting signal. This could be of

essential help for professional in controlling damages (human, economic and/or brand-related) by adopting the appropriate solutions and making the necessary changes before the situation gets really critical. Detecting signals may constitute a pre-crisis phase that is a constant must for any successful organization, as it can often minimize if not completely avoid the real crisis and speculate the context as an opportunity to design and implement new strategies and make necessary organizational changes.

We would insist here on signals and constant parameters that provide the organization clues for undertaking structural changes according to their own environment and strategies.

Signals relate to all kind of factors that constantly affect any organization's activity and decisions. They are strongly connected to the general context (economic, political or social) in which the organizations operate and which have a strong influence upon day-to-day decisions. Any particular change in the structure, trends or stability of the context is most likely to affect the regular activity of its actors and a slow or no reaction creates the prerequisites for a possible crisis.

Stakeholders, competition, internal human resources also provide early signals that can help prevent a crisis if they are properly detected and taken into consideration.

Early awareness and proper decisions allow equally early risk assessment, opportunity identification and probation of new strategies that may contribute to an effective damage control process and a fast recovery after the crisis had been overcome.

Once definitions and classification having been accepted and stages having been defined, we can proceed to defining and analyzing the role of communication in overcoming crisis situations.

Basically seen as the process of sending and receiving information, communication is defined by Manuel Castells (2009) as sharing of meaning through the exchange of information between different actors in specific contexts. We can see thus a subtle transition from the sending-receiving information to sharing (actively) and exchanging meanings (meaningful information).

Starting from Castells' definition of communication, we can define crisis communication as a concentrated effort undertaken by an organization facing a crisis situation to communicate, to strongly link to its public, stakeholders and employees, to exchange and share with them truly meaningful information in order to persuade and to reduce as much as possible the negative impact of the unexpected event over the organization's reputation. As we accept that crisis is perceptual (Coombs 2015), when talking about overcoming one, we are talking about narratives, dialogues, strategies, persuasiveness, meanings, consistency, perception and control. We are talking about what, how and when to communicate in a crisis situation.

Mastering crisis communication is an essential tool for any professional facing a crisis situation, although it may often be regarded as second-hand skill, due to the importance of other factors in the economy of any organization, such as performance, human resource, financial resources and/or technical resources.

What is crisis communication, though? It represents a sub-specialty of the public relations that is designed to protect and defend an individual, company, or organization facing a public challenge to its reputation with control, responsibility and transparency as essential features.

In applying a crisis communication strategy, one must accurately establish which the answers to the following questions are:
- What happened and how big really is the problem?
- Which will be the real impact of the crisis on the organization's reputation?
- What does the public think happened?
- How has the public reacted (supportive or hostile)?
- How visible is the issue the organization is facing?
- Which communication channels need immediate attention?

Only after having had established the full story, a real and accurate understanding of the impact and a very clear and realistic image of the public reaction, professionals can develop the position that the organization should take public by stating its fundamental corporate values. Before going public though, the organization has to anticipate what is likely to happen and which could be the worst possible scenario.

As we see, crisis communication is a more complex process that it seemed and it should start even from the first pre-crisis stage with an anticipation of crisis potential and damage risks (Bernstein, 2013), followed by an immediate acknowledgement of a crisis situation, real or potential.

The acknowledgement of the crisis must be followed by a real crisis plan that has to identify the crisis situation communications team comprising senior executives (top level decision-making people), top public relations person, legal and technical counsels.

The third, and of critical importance is the identification and training of the spokesperson that has to have very strong public communication skills at the moment he/she comes out to manage the crisis.

Training the spokesperson might be one of the most difficult tasks to accomplish as it has to be extremely concentrated, but comprehensive and thorough as well.

Public communication has got to a point where everything depends on effective communication skills and mastering of the 7 C's of effective communication (Iirmies 2013, from http://tinyurl.com/jau5u67) which apply to both written as well

as oral communication:

1. **Completeness.** The communication must be complete. It should convey all facts required by the audience. The sender of the message must take into consideration the receiver's mind set and convey the message accordingly. A complete communication develops and enhances the reputation of both the communicator and the organization he/she represents, always giving additional information wherever required and leaving no questions in the mind of receiver, never missing any crucial piece of information. Also, complete communication improves the better decision-making process as the audience gets all desired and crucial information, being easily persuaded by the full message content.

2. **Conciseness.** Communicating what one wants in least possible words is an essential aspect of an effective communication process, being both time-saving as well as cost-saving. Also, one must know that by providing short and essential message in limited words to the audience avoids repetition and makes the message more appealing and comprehensible to the audience, considerably reducing the risk of misunderstanding.

3. **Consideration.** Consideration implies "stepping into the others' shoes", taking into consideration the audience with its view points, background, mind-set, education level, emotions, and so on. A considerate communication process must empathize with the audience and exhibit interest in the audience, stimulating a positive reaction from the audience. It also shows optimism by emphasizing on "what is possible" rather than "what is impossible".

4. **Clarity** implies emphasizing on a specific message or goal at a time, rather than trying to achieve too much at once. Clarity in communication makes use of exact, appropriate and concrete words, makes understanding easier, enhancing the meaning of message.

5. **Concreteness** implies being particular and clear rather than fuzzy and general, avoiding misinterpretation. It strengthens the confidence by using specific facts and figures, clear words that build the reputation.

6. **Courtesy** in message implies the message should show the sender's expression as well as should respect the receiver. The sender of the message should be sincerely polite, judicious, reflective and enthusiastic, positive and focused at the audience.

7. **Correctness** in communication implies that the message is exact, correct, accurate and well-timed, having thus an increased impact on the audience.

The spokesperson is the one to ensure the creation and promotion of the image that the organization really wants to have, and to achieve this it is necessary that

he / she know very well the details of the organization and integrate in the identity and culture of the organization. (Irimies 2013)

The identification and training of the spokesperson during the specific crisis situation must be followed (Bernstein 2013) by the establishment of a notification and monitoring system that will allow the organization to rapidly reach its stakeholders using multiple modalities (phone numbers, email addresses, text messages, social media) and to constantly monitor the feedback to communication.

Identification of stakeholders (internal and external) that matter and really impact the organization might be vital in order to successfully overcome a crisis, as they are the organization's most important audience. Referring to internal stakeholders, Jonathan Bernstein (2013) asserted that every employee is a PR representative and crisis manager for your organization whether you want them to be or not.

Only after having gone through all the above steps the crisis communications team will develop a set of key messages, holding statements (that also can and should be developed in the pre-crisis stage by designing scenarios where the organization is perceived to be vulnerable) (Bernstein 2013).

The messages have to be meaningful, strongly supported by arguments and persuasive in order to defend the organization's reputation and should be adapted according to the evolution of each specific crisis.

According to Thierry Libaert's (2009) research, the message in a crisis situation has to meet certain major requirements in order to be really effective. It has thus to be extremely coherent, differentiated from other sources (strongly linked to the organization's identity), easily understandable, visible, adaptable and consistent.

As we can see, messages, spokespersons, crisis management teams play an essential role in any crisis management process, as they not only represent the organization facing the crisis in front of stakeholders, but they also plan, develop and manage the organization's brand identity. This is the major challenge that an organization has to face during a crisis situation that affects not only its public position as statistic data, but also its reputation, its values and its identity.

References

1. Barton, L. (2001). *Crisis in organizations* (2nd ed.). Cincinnati: College Devisions South-Western.
2. Bernstein, J. (2013). *10 Steps of Crisis Communications*. Retrieved from http://bern steincrisismanagement.com/the-10-steps-of-crisis-communications/, accessed August 10th 2016.
3. Castells, M. (2009). *Communication Power*, Oxford University Press.
4. Chiciudean, I., David, G. (2011). *Managementul comunicarii in situatii de criza*, Comunicare.ro

5. Coman, C. (2011). *Relatiile publice. Principii si strategii*, Ed. Polirom, Iaşi.
6. Coombs, J.T. (2015). *Ongoing Crisis Communication: Planning, Managing and Responding*, Sage Publications.
7. Fearn-Banks, K. (2015). *Crisis Communication: A Casebook Approach*, Vth Edition, Routledge.
8. Libaert, Th. (2008). *Comunicarea de criza*, Ed. C.H. Beck, Bucureşti.
9. Libaert, Th. (2009). *Planul de comunicare. Cum sa-ti definesti si sa-ti organizezi strategia de comunicare*, Ed. Polirom, Iaşi.
10. Irimies, C. (2013). Effective communication – an essential step towards public success. *Journal of Media Research*, no. 1(15).
11. Irimies, L. (2013). Managing Media. Important Steps in Influencing Public Opinion, "Literature, Discourse and Multicultural Dialogue". *Arhipelag* XXI.
12. Mitroff, I.I., Anagnos, G. (2001). *Managing Crises Before They Happen: What Every Executive and Manager Needs to Know About Crisis Management*, Amacom New York.