Incorporating Situational Crisis Communication and Attribution Theories Into a Crisis Communication Plan for Xyz Organization

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We the undersigned, certify that we read this thesis and approve it as adequate in scope and quality for the degree Master of Arts.

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ABSTRACT

A crisis can be defined as “an unexpected, non-routine event that creates uncertainty and threatens an organization’s priority goals” (Dean, 2004, p. 192). If not handled properly, it may have negative effects on the organization’s reputation and overall viability. Therefore, it is essential that organizations prepare an effective crisis response plan to implement once a crisis occurs. Situational crisis communication theory (SCCT) is a proven theory used in developing effective crisis response strategies. This theory asserts that organizations must select the crisis strategies most appropriate to the type of crisis (Coombs, 2006). Heider’s attribution theory asserts that how we react to situations is based on our perception of the situation and our judgment of the situation (Coombs & Holladay, 1996). Informed by these perspectives, the purpose of this project is to develop a custom crisis communication plan for xyz organization. This organization is very well known among its publics, as its history of legendary member service has stood for nearly a century. However, the organization lacks a crisis response strategy. This is alarming as the organization has a large customer-facing workforce that deals with thousands of customers per month in a variety of situations. This standalone crisis communication plan will enable xyz organization to respond to a variety of crises in order to minimize any reputational or financial harm.
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Chapter 1. INTRODUCTION

A crisis can be defined as “an unexpected, non-routine event that creates uncertainty and threatens an organization’s priority goals” (Dean, 2004, p. 192). Managers worry about crises because they create specific negative effects, including (a) increased anger, (b) decreased reputation, (c) increased negative word-of-mouth comments, and (d) decreased purchase intention (Coombs, 2013). In fact, if not handled properly, a crisis may significantly damage an organization’s reputation and threaten its overall economic vitality. Therefore, it is critically important that organizations understand how their publics may respond to various types of crises, and select the response strategy that is most appropriate.

Crisis response strategies seek to protect an organization by eliminating or reducing reputational damage (Coombs & Holladay, 1996). Implementing the most appropriate response strategies should minimize reputational damage to an organization as a result of the crisis; when stakeholders “forget about a crisis, anger subsides and purchase intentions return” (Coombs, 2013, p. 238).

As such, effective crisis communication plans are critical in maintaining or restoring the reputation of an organization. However, not all crisis communication plans are equal, as the success of a crisis management effort is dependent on what the organization says and does after the crisis occurs (Coombs & Holladay, 2001).

IMPORTANCE OF THE STUDY

For nonprofit organizations, the need to develop and implement effective crisis response strategies is no less important than for-profit companies as their future directly depends on voluntary financial supporters. Since nearly 75 percent of nonprofits’ funds come from
individual donors, a crisis that damages their reputation could have disastrous effects on the future of these organizations (Fotsch, 2009). Furthermore, Fotsch asserts that if not-for-profits faced with a crisis employed the most effective strategies for communicating with their publics, they might be better able to restore a positive reputation and, ultimately, ensure the continued success of their organizations once the crisis has passed (Fotsch, 2009, p. 1).

The foundation of a successful plan therein lies in preparing and understanding the true nature of the crisis and the appropriate way to respond to various types of crises.

This is particularly true for the nonprofit organization (hereafter referred to as xyz corporation) considered for this project. More than 875,000 members in the state fund the organization. In exchange for member dues, the organization provides products and services that are relevant to their everyday lives, including travel, roadside assistance, auto repair, insurance, discounts, traffic safety, and advocacy services. Without these members and their dues, the organization would no longer exist to fulfill its mission.

Unfortunately, xyz organization has not had a crisis communication plan in place, yet the organization has many crisis risk areas. Over 650 employees are spread out over a corporate location, one dozen field offices, and statewide fleet operations. Each day, employees interact with the public in a variety of ways. In addition, the large fleet base and contractor network responds to hundreds of thousands of emergency calls each year, often times in remote or risky locations. As a result, the structure and business model of the organization expose it to tremendous liability and have the ability to threaten its very existence if a crisis occurs. While the organization has process plans in place should a business interruption occur, these business continuity plans do not address how the organization should communicate during a time of crisis.
The most sound business recovery plan is useless should the organization’s reputation be severely damaged as a result of a crisis. In addition, the organization also has a very basic social media crisis response plan; however, that plan is created and managed by an external party, is not based in communication theory, and only covers crises that emerge in social channels.

The project is important in that it creates a crisis communication plan based on sound communication theory for xyz organization to use in response to different types of crises. The project demonstrates why the theoretical approach is appropriate for minimizing negative reactions from internal and external audiences. The plan incorporates situational crisis communication theory (SCCT) and attribution theory as a basis for the plan; both theories are explained in chapter two. These theories provide a solid foundation for identifying the crisis type and potential attribution in order to select the most effective response strategies and minimize reputational damage.

**DEFINITION OF KEY TERMS**

Below are definitions of key terms used throughout this project.

**Crisis:** An unexpected, non-routine event that creates uncertainty and threatens an organization’s priority goals (Dean, 2004, p. 192).

**Crisis communication or response plans:** A plan created by crisis managers to “protect an organization by eliminating or reducing reputational damage (Coombs & Holladay, 2001, p. 280).

**Situational crisis communication theory (SCCT):** Developed by Coombs, this theory holds that organizations must select the crisis strategies most appropriate to the type of crisis experienced (Coombs, 2006).
Attribution theory: Heider’s attribution theory asserts that how we react to situations is based on our perception of the situation and our judgment of the situation (Coombs & Holladay, 1996).

Pre-crisis phase: The prevention and preparation tactics meant to minimize the time spent during a crisis dealing with tasks unrelated to the crisis itself.

Crisis management team: Key staff members who assemble in times of crisis in order to analyze the crisis and respond appropriately.

Crisis attribution: People make judgments about the causes of events, often seeking a party to blame if the event had negative outcomes. Therefore, when an organizational crisis occurs, stakeholders will likely assign various levels of attributions towards all parties.

Post-crisis response: Additional follow-up communication and actions that are necessary in order to repair reputational damage, depending on the crisis type and response strategies.

ORGANIZATION OF REMAINING CHAPTERS

As mentioned previously, this project is a finished crisis communication plan for xyz organization to consider adopting. The plan includes a framework for the pre-crisis, crisis, and post-crisis phases. It includes a description of the various types of crises in order to match the crises type to the appropriate response strategies. It also incorporates considerations from both SCCT and attribution theory in order to assess the best response strategy as well as identify where the various publics may attribute blame depending on the crisis, the organization’s crisis history, and the organization’s relationship with its’ stakeholders.

Finally, the plan includes important steps and actions for the organization to consider during the post-crisis phase. These steps will seek to minimize long-term reputational damage to the organization, as well as identify potential organizational weaknesses that may result in future
crises if not addressed. Upon completion of the project, the intent is to present it to the described organization for the purpose of implementing the plan.

The following chapters begin with the second chapter, a literature review which summarizes the existing research in the field and provides a theoretical foundation for the proposed plan. Chapter three will outline the scope and methodology of the project. Chapter four is the standalone crisis communication plan and corresponding appendices, designed for implementation by xyz organization. Chapter five provides conclusions, further considerations, and limitations of the plan.
Chapter 2. REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Ethics are at the core of the professional public relations practice. Public relations professionals must strive to be ethical in their representations of an organization and should not seek to twist the truth or deceive publics to the benefit of an organization (www.prsa.org). In fact, the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) provides firm ethical guidance for professionals, which state that professionals should

- protect and advance the free flow of accurate and truthful information,
- be honest and accurate in all communication,
- foster informed decision making through open communication,
- protect confidential and private information,
- promote healthy and fair competition among professionals,
- avoid conflicts of interest, and
- work to strengthen the public’s trust in the profession.

(http://www.prsa.org/AboutPRSA/Ethics/)

Therefore, it is critical that public relations professionals insist that organizations act ethically during a crisis, even if it may mean the organization will suffer reputational damage as a result of being honest and transparent. In fact, it is the role of the public relations professional to convince the organization that further reputational damage may result if the organization is not honest and accountable during a crisis.

PHILOSOPHICAL AND ETHICAL ASSUMPTIONS

In order to provide the best guidance during a time of crisis, public relations professionals must understand how to respond during a crisis in a way that is ethically accurate, yet minimizes
damage to the organization. The importance of ethics in regards to crisis response cannot be understated. A crisis is usually a chaotic time for an organization; as points of view and various facts are considered, it is often difficult to determine which response is the right one. To make matters more complicated, the fact that the very livelihood of the organization and its staff may be in jeopardy often results in clouded judgment. However, it is critically important to approach crises ethically, therefore, “ethical theory offers ground for a moral stance” (Griffin, 2012, p.454).

Although various ethical theories may differ in their approach, advocates all agree that a “consistent procedure for reaching moral decisions is preferable to relying on changing feelings or the whims of fleeting conscience” (Griffin, 2012, p.454). The ethics theory that formed the foundation of my crisis communication approach was Aristotle’s golden mean principle in which he suggested a “golden mean” as a way to solve an ethical dilemma, versus approaching it from an extreme stance of deceit or brutal honesty (Griffin, 2012, p. 349).

From a crisis communication perspective, the golden mean suggests that the crisis manager avoid pandering to the crowd, sugar-coating the truth, or ignoring sensitivities (Griffin, 2012). Instead, this ethical perspective focuses on being straightforward, avoiding inflammatory language, and being assertive in the truth while also allowing for subtle audience adaptations (Griffin, 2012). From this perspective, the golden mean provides an appropriate middle ground for organizations to act ethically during a crisis, ensuring they do not deceive their publics nor share confidential or unnecessary information for the sake of complete candor.

THEORETICAL BASIS

Coombs’s situational crisis communication theory (SCCT) understands the philosophical assumptions publics maintain in regards to the way organizations are expected to behave
Crisis Communication Project

(Coombs & Holladay, 1996). Organizations that fail to accept and understand this social contract with their publics may find their future at risk.

This theory holds that organizations select the crisis strategies most appropriate to the type of crisis (Coombs, 2006). In order to identify the best crisis response strategy, it is critical to understand how stakeholders react to various strategy responses. The theory asserts that “a clearer understanding of how stakeholders react to crisis response strategies improves our ability to match them to the crisis situation” (Coombs, 2006, p. 242).

SCCT is composed of three main elements (a) the crisis situation, (b) the crisis response strategies, and (c) the method of matching the crisis situation to the appropriate response strategy(ies) (Coombs, 2006). In order to identify the most appropriate crisis response strategy, the crisis type must first be identified. SCCT asserts that there are three types of crises: victim, accident and preventable crises (Coombs, 2006). Crisis response will therefore depend on the type of crisis that has taken place, as each crisis calls for a different response.

For victim crises, the organization should employ strategies that remind their publics they are not to blame for the crisis (Fotsch, 2009). Accident crises must assume partial blame while seeking to mitigate reputational damage, depending on the type of accident and involvement of the organization (Fotsch, 2009). Organizations cannot completely displace blame in accidents, because it is likely that the organization had a role in the accident. For preventable crises, it is important for the organization to employ strategies that quickly accept responsibility and then move the discussion to the changes the organization will take to minimize the crisis from occurring again (Fotsch, 2009).

In addition, understanding where the public may assign blame is a key factor in effective crisis response. Heider’s attribution theory asserts that how we react to situations is based on our
perception of the situation and our judgment of the situation (Coombs & Holladay, 1996). In judging the situation, we determine the role of the participants; the more intentional the role, the more negative our feelings are towards them. In fact, during a crisis, people search for blame. Four causal criteria people often use when making these attributions of blame include stability, external control, personal control, and locus (Coombs & Holladay, 1996). Therefore, attribution theory is a “useful framework for explaining the relation between a situation and the selection of communication strategies” (Coombs & Holladay, 1996, p. 281).

THE LITERATURE

Reputation is how an organization is perceived by its publics (Coombs, 2006). Impulsive decisions can result in bad decisions, costing individuals and organizations precious time and money. This is unequivocally true when responding to a crisis, as “when you make decisions in haste, they are most likely to be the wrong ones” (Horn, 2014, p. 2). While it’s critical that organizations offer solutions to a crisis, these solutions must not be made in haste, or else further reputational damage may result (Horn, 2014).

Proper preparation and appropriate response is important during a crisis, and this is especially true during the initial phase of the crisis, when public attention is at its peak. Referred to by political scientist Brendan Nyhan as the “scandal attention cycle”, it refers to the “window of time during which interest in a crisis rises and peaks” (Cafasso, 2013, p.1). Once a crisis breaks, public and media attention is at its highest, but then typically falls afterward, as reporters rush to embrace the scandal narrative, but quickly lose interest after the most sensational charges are not substantiated (Nyhan, 2013).

To ensure organizations are able to get their message out during this peak time, they must be prepared when a crisis strikes. If an organization has a crisis response plan already in place,
the plan can be immediately executed once the crisis occurs and is identified. Proper planning includes understanding how audiences may respond to particular crises, as “a clearer understanding of how stakeholders react to crisis response strategies improves our ability to match them to the crisis situation” (Coombs, 2006, p. 242).

An effective crisis response plan will also prevent the organization from over-relying on the media to disseminate their message once the initial crisis is over and the organization is focused on rebuilding their image. An effective plan will have identified key audiences and stakeholders as well as the best ways to reach these audiences outside of mass media channels. This is important, as “although the mass media has lost interest, the influential, often passionate groups that follow your organization most closely have formed strong impressions and opinions that need to be validated and changed” (Caffaso, 2013, p. 1).

Situational crisis communication theory (SCCT) is used as a theory-based and evidence-based method for responding to various crisis situations. SCCT is composed of three components: 1) the crisis situation, 2) crisis response strategies, and 3) a system for matching the crisis situation and crisis response strategies (Coombs, 2006).

**The crisis situation**

The crisis situation is the foundation of the model, as the extent of the potential reputational damage inflicted by a crisis is the primary motivator behind selection of the response strategies. In determining the severity of a crisis and the potential reputational damage it may cause, crisis responsibility must also be identified. Therefore, when a crisis occurs, organizations must first determine how much responsibility stakeholders will place on the organization. This can be assessed by first understanding the various crises types, as “stakeholders will attribute different amounts of crisis responsibility to the various crisis types”
(Coombs, 2006, p. 243). Understanding stakeholders’ attributions of crisis responsibility is important, as the greater the blame placed on the organization, the greater reputational damage the crisis may impose.

To assist in crisis type identification, SCCT groups the crisis types into three categories or clusters, with the assumption that crises in the same cluster will have underlying similarities that allow one crisis plan to apply to the entire cluster group (Coombs, 2006). This simplifies and streamlines the crisis response approach, as organizations will not need to create a separate crisis response plan for every different crisis scenario. Below are the crisis clusters as presented in the SCCT model (Coombs, 2006):

- **Victim Cluster**—in these types of crises, the organization is also a victim of the crisis. Victim crises include natural disasters, rumors, workplace violence, external product tampering or malevolence.
- **Accidental Cluster**—the organizational actions leading up to the crisis were unintentional but the organization did play a role in the crisis. Crises of this type include accusations that the organization is operating in an inappropriate manner, including mega damage from environmental causes, technical breakdown accidents, or technical breakdown recalls.
- **Preventable Cluster**—the organization knowingly placed people at risk, took inappropriate actions, or violated a law or regulation. These include human breakdown or errors, egregious organizational misdeed with our without injuries, and gross management misconduct.
Crisis response strategies

When assessing a crisis situation and matching the appropriate response strategy, identifying the crisis type serves to set the framework that shapes how stakeholders might respond to the crisis (Coombs & Holladay, 1996). In total, four elements must be considered when identifying a response strategy, according to SCCT: (1) the crisis type, (2) the severity of damage, (3) the organization’s crisis history, and (4) the relationship history between the organization and its stakeholders (Coombs, 2006).

By first identifying the crisis type, the organization can initially assess the crisis cluster and appropriate response plan. Then, any additional considerations regarding crisis severity, crisis history, and relationship must be considered before the final response plan is selected. SCCT argues that information about past crises is a significant factor that can affect performance of a more recent crisis (Coombs, 2004). In fact, Coombs has previously demonstrated that a history of past crises will intensify the attributions of crisis responsibility and increased negative feelings about the organization (Coombs, 2004). However, a favorable relationship history between the organization and its stakeholders may serve as a buffer against damage caused by a crisis (Coombs, 2004). As such, when relationship history is negative, stakeholders are likely to view crises more negatively; thus, this performance history “is like Velcro; it attracts and snags additional reputational damage” (Coombs & Holladay, 2001, p. 335). The media may also pay particular attention to an organization that has a crisis history, as a company’s rap sheet makes a new crisis much easier to tell (Caffaso, 2013). As such, any organization that has experienced a crisis in the past must take this into account when selecting a crisis response strategy, as stakeholders may judge and place blame on the organization with a crisis history more acutely than if the organization has a clean slate.
Any negative factors would then intensify reputational damage and the crisis may be moved to a more damaging crisis cluster and response plan. By increasing reputational threat due to past crises, the crisis response strategy may be altered, and the next severe strategy may need to be used. In fact, fighting the attributions of crisis responsibility by denying or trying to contradict responsibility in past crises may backfire.

Attribution theory states that “people will make judgments about the causes of events, especially unexpected events with negative outcomes” (Coombs, 2004, p. 267). Therefore, a crisis is an event that would certainly trigger stakeholders to assess attributions towards the parties involved. If the perception is that the organization could control the crisis, then stakeholders will likely attribute that the organization has a level of responsibility. Greater attributions of responsibility will likely incur stronger feelings of anger and resentment towards the organization (Coombs, 2004).

Three factors are typically employed when assessing attribution: stability, external control and personal control (Coombs, 2004). Stability refers to the frequency of the event; if it is rare, it’s unstable, but if it has occurred repeatedly, it is stable. If outside factors control a person, strong external control exists, where personal control reflects whether the event may be controlled or uncontrolled by the parties involved. These three factors help a person determine if the crisis was mainly caused by the organization or by external factors (Coombs, 2004).

Therefore, organizational crisis responsibility “should be perceived as strongest when the cause is stable (the organization has a history of crises), external control is low (outside factors are not controlling the crisis or organization), and personal control is internal (the crisis originates from those inside the organization” (Coombs, 2004, p. 268). Thus, attribution theory provides a key link in matching the crisis with the appropriate response strategy.
Basic response options fall into three categories, depending on crisis type and stakeholder attribution. These responses include deny, diminish, and rebuild. These strategies seek to impact an organization’s image by either (a) convincing stakeholders there is no crisis, (b) have stakeholders see the crisis as less negative, or (c) have stakeholders see the organization more positively (Coombs & Holladay, 1996). The deny option “seeks to prove that no crisis exists or that the organization has no responsibility for the crisis” (Coombs, 2006, p. 247). The diminish option acknowledges a crisis has occurred but attempts to alter the attributions stakeholders may make about crisis responsibility in order to diminish the organization’s involvement in it and reduce reputational damage. Lastly, the rebuild option, reserved for the severest of crises types, seeks to accept responsibility and repair reputational damage as soon as possible (Coombs, 2006).

Below is a general overview of response strategies by option (Coombs, 2006):

Deny

- Attack the accuser by confronting the person or group claiming a crisis exists.
- Deny that a crisis even exists.
- Clarify why no crisis exists.
- Scapegoat by blaming someone outside the organization.

Diminish

- Provide an excuse minimizing organizational responsibility, claiming lack of control around event surrounding the crisis or lack of intent to do harm.
- Provide justification surrounding the crisis damage, claiming damage was very minor or confined.
Rebuild

- Ingratiation to stakeholders, reminding them of past good deeds or praising stakeholders.
- Express concern/compassion for any victims.
- Express regret or concern as a partial apology.
- Praise others in an attempt to gain their approval.
- Provide a full apology and/or another form of rectification or remediation.

**Matching Response Strategies**

Understanding the crisis types and response options will assist organizations in matching the crisis type with the appropriate response strategy and option. Typically, crises that fall into the victim cluster would engage the deny option, as crisis attribution is very low and the crisis represents only a mild reputational threat. Crises that fall into the accidental cluster have a greater likelihood of crisis responsibility, so the diminish option may be used. Lastly, crises in the preventable cluster produce “very strong attributions of crisis responsibility with severe reputational threat” so the rebuild option is most appropriate (Coombs, 2006, p. 249).

It should be noted that using the deny option is risky and should only be used if organizations can prove they had no crisis responsibility, such as false accusations. Organizations that use the deny option without significant proof may actually do more harm than good, as denial strategies may actually keep the crisis alive.

In addition, engaging the full range of rebuild options may be seen as a formal apology and may expose the organization to legal liabilities. In these cases, the organization may push to lessen the response, using sympathy strategies over apologetic actions. However, in crises involving egregious misdeeds, severe injury or loss of life, apologies are recommended and in
some cases, may actually work in the organization’s behavior in court (Coombs, 2006, p. 257). Research has demonstrated that in crises involving organizational misdeeds, an apology is expected and if not used, the negative effects of the crisis are likely to intensify (Coombs, 2013).

From a media perspective, the crisis also becomes less interesting after an apology, as a central conflict of the crisis is over.

**RATIONALE**

As noted above, previous research conducted on the effectiveness of SCCT and attribution theory has demonstrated that these theories are an effective foundation for identifying the crisis and selecting the appropriate crisis response. Furthermore, determining the degree of responsibility the public may attribute to the organization and executing the suggested response strategies seem to reduce the reputational damage for organizations (Coombs & Holladay, 1996). If an organization responds correctly to a crisis it has a “greater likelihood of preserving the public’s favor and sustaining the public’s engagement in the future” (Coombs & Holladay, 1996, p. 13).

In addition, crisis history and relationship with stakeholders has an impact on the organization’s reputation after a crisis. A good reputation benefits the company with goodwill, but “it also means that consumers will have high expectations for the company to act appropriately in times of crisis” (Dean, 2004, p. 208). In summary, organizations suffered the least reputational damage when a matched crisis response strategy was used.

As demonstrated, SCCT and attribution theory are effective foundations for creating effective crisis response plans and using these theories will assist organizations in selecting the most appropriate strategy and thereby minimize reputational damage.
As mentioned, xyz organization does not have a crisis communication plan. This organization offers products and services aimed at providing peace of mind to over 875,000 customers in the state. In addition, the organization currently enjoys a very positive reputation with its customers; customer satisfaction with all services is very high by comparable industry standards and annual customer renewal rates are above 83 percent. Therefore, if a crisis occurs, xyz organization is ill-equipped to accurately respond, jeopardizing the goodwill and loyalty it has worked hard to secure over the past 80 years. This organization will greatly benefit from a customized crisis communication plan that is based in sound theory using SCCT and attribution principles.
Chapter 3. SCOPE AND METHODOLOGY

THE SCOPE OF THE STUDY

The scope of this project was limited to creating a crisis communication plan for xyz organization. While the theoretical basis used in the plan may be applicable to other organizations, the crises response plan was specific to the organization and will be presented to the organization as such. Therefore, it was not meant to be used as a general crisis communication template.

Since xyz organization has an existing social media crisis communication plan, this plan did not focus on social media. However, In order to ensure that the organization is equipped to effectively respond to all crises, it is recommended that the organization work with the appropriate third party to revise the existing social media crisis plan, drawing on the theoretical basis used in this plan, to ensure alignment in messaging and approach.

METHODOLOGY OF THE STUDY

The theories set the foundation for the crisis communication plan, and asserted that crises may be categorized by three types of main crises types: accidental, victim, and preventable. The type of crisis determined the specific response strategies; therefore, the ultimate success of the crisis response plan is largely dependent upon proper crisis categorization.

The plan also demonstrated the important role that attribution theory plays in the public’s evaluation and assessment of the organization’s role in the strategy. The public judges the crisis and tries to determine blame; the greater blame the public places on the organization, the more negative their feelings will be toward the organization. It is important to understand how the public assesses the organization’s responsibility prior to selecting crisis response strategies.
Drawing from these theories, the plan explained several potential crisis scenarios applicable to the organization. Using an objective set of criteria, each crisis scenario was evaluated in order to determine if it fell within the accident, victim, or preventable crisis type. Once this was determined, the appropriate response strategies were selected. The plan included various considerations for both internal and external audiences, including employees, board of directors, news media, members (customers) of the organization, and potential members. The plan also incorporated the organization’s various communication tools into the strategies for maximum impact.

During the crisis communication design phase, xyz organization’s existing business recovery plan was considered and used as a basis for identifying potential crises and crisis management team members. In addition, to ensure the appropriate messages and communication tools were used, the findings from an earlier communication audit of the organization were considered in the development of the plan. This audit was completed in late 2013 and included an inventory of the various communication tools and methods used by the organization and assessed the strengths and weaknesses of these communication tools. In addition, several interviews with key internal stakeholders were held in order to determine specifics of the plan.

The intended audience for the plan includes the public relations team, the internal communication team, the crisis management team, the executive team, and the chief executive officer. The plan was intended for internal audiences only.

**ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS**

The effectiveness of the crisis response strategies depend largely on the ability to honestly and accurately identify the crisis situation. An organization may be hesitant to identify
a crisis as preventable or to assume any responsibility in an accident, and in many instances, legal counsel may recommend the organization stay silent in litigious situations. While these repercussions must be seriously considered, care should be taken to ensure tactics aren’t favored that may have a long-term negative impact on reputation.

The organization has an ethical responsibility to ensure that crises are honestly assessed and that the strategies selected aren’t ones that will simply seek to minimize or shift blame. If this responsibility isn’t taken seriously, the organization risks further reputational damage by losing the trust of a public that believes they have been misled. In many cases, this may mean that the public relations practitioner will need to objectively explain the criteria for the crisis category, explain why the crisis falls into a specific category, and firmly recommend the appropriate strategies. The organization must also ensure key information that may impact crisis analysis is not withheld in order to put the crisis in a more favorable light.

The forthcoming sections of this project, up to and including the appendix, are the crisis communication plan for xyz organization. This plan is a standalone document for practitioners to implement within xyz organization. Prior to presenting the plan to the organization, the plan will be finalized to include key contact information and other identifying information. In addition, the final plan will be bound into a booklet so that it may be used as a standalone document.
# Chapter 4. THE PROJECT

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CRISIS COMMUNICATION PLAN

Prepared exclusively for XYZ organization
May 2015
DESCRIPTION

Crisis management is a critical function of organizations. A mishandled crisis can result in severe reputational damage and may ultimately jeopardize the economic viability of an organization. By responding quickly and honestly, the organization can help prevent inaccurate Information from spreading and help mitigate the impact the crisis may have on the organization’s reputation and overall viability.

Therefore, understanding what constitutes a crisis and quickly identifying the most appropriate way to respond may mean the difference between a temporary brand blemish and a chronic problem with devastating results. Further, the explosion of social media and the 24/7 news cycle has resulted in the public’s nearly insatiable desire for immediate and detailed information. Organizations that cannot act nimbly and swiftly may run the risk of further reputational damage as other sources may rush to fill the information void.

Broadly, a crisis is defined as a significant threat to an organization that can have negative consequences if not properly handled. It poses a significant threat to the organization’s reputation, its’ stakeholders, and the industry. Crisis management plans are therefore designed to protect an organization from threats and reduce damage from the crisis. A crisis communication plan is not a step-by-step set of instructions; rather it is a reference tool providing key information and guidelines on how to identify and respond to different types of crises.

There are three phases of a crisis communication plan: pre-crisis planning, crisis response, and the post-crisis phase. The pre-crisis phase involves prevention and preparation tactics meant to minimize the time spent during a crisis dealing with tasks unrelated to the crisis itself. The crisis phase involves tactics to employ when the crisis hits. The post-crisis phase involves analyzing the crisis response plan for effectiveness, fulfilling promises made to
stakeholders during the crisis, and assessing short and long-term reputational damage and rebuilding strategies.
**PRE-CRISIS PHASE**

Pre-crisis planning involves identifying known organizational risks that could lead to a crisis. In addition, it also involves additional preparation work designed to maximize efficient response time after a crisis hits.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Key Pre-Crisis Components</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Identify a list of organizational risks in order to determine potential crises.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Designate a crisis management team and distribute accurate contact information.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conduct media training for all potential crises spokesperson.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Draft message templates for use during the initial phase of crisis.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Develop additional communication channels for crisis phase, including dark web sites or hot lines.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Crisis identification**

Although a crisis often occurs unexpectedly, the organization should have a keen understanding in advance of risk areas in order to identify potential crisis. For the purposes of this plan, a cross-functional business line team was assembled to identify potential crisis areas across xyz organization in order to obtain a holistic view of potential organizational risks. The team members included representatives from public relations, legal, human resources, information technology, internal audit, finance, facilities, and each business line owner. In addition to understanding organizational risks, the team identified industry issues or trends that may pose a potential for risk.
In determining the severity of a crisis and the potential reputational damage it may cause, crisis responsibility must then be identified. If the crisis consists of a true emergency involving injury or death, the organization’s first responsibility is to contact emergency personnel in order to ensure the safety of all involved parties.

Once various crisis areas are assessed, organizations must determine how much responsibility stakeholders will place on the organization. This can be assessed by first understanding the various crises types. To assist in crisis type identification, SCCT groups the crisis types into three cluster types: victim, accident, and preventable. The assumption is that crises in the same cluster will have underlying similarities that allow one crisis plan to apply to the entire cluster group. This simplifies and streamlines the crisis response approach, as organizations will not need to create a separate crisis response plan for every different crisis scenario.

Based on the various crisis risks identified by members of xyz organization, the crises were initially assigned into one of the three clusters.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Victim</th>
<th>Accident</th>
<th>Preventable</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• natural disasters impacting business operations</td>
<td>• accusations that the organization is operating in an incorrect manner</td>
<td>• human negligence that otherwise could have been prevented (fleet)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• rumors or unwarranted attacks</td>
<td>• workplace accidents (fleet/roadside)</td>
<td>• embezzlement or fraud</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• workplace violence</td>
<td>• damage from external factors</td>
<td>• information hacking where information shows the organization could have taken reasonable prevention measures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• acts of terrorism</td>
<td>• technology breakdowns or incidents</td>
<td>• negligence in following processes/policies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Vendor misconduct or malevolence</td>
<td>• mistakes or delays in service delivery (repair or fleet)</td>
<td>• workplace acts that could have been prevented involving injury/death</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Picketing based on false accusations</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Crisis management team**

A crisis management team should be designated prior to the onset of a crisis. Key members of the crisis management team will likely include public relations, human resources, legal, facilities, finance, information technology, and business line owners. However, the composition of the team will vary based on the nature of the crisis, as not all members of the initial team may be needed for the crisis response. For example, for a crisis involving information hacking, business line owners may not be needed. In addition to developing a team, the crisis management has also pre-identified a crisis management team headquarters where the team will meet regularly during the crisis to discuss updates and action plans.
Once the crisis has hit, the crisis communication team should be engaged in order to identify the crisis and select the plan and pursuant tactics.

Emergency Communications Headquarters

Two areas have been designated, one for use by the crisis management team to gather for regular updates; the second is for use by the media in order to disseminate any updates.

- Crisis management team headquarters

  The room for staff serves as a coordination point from which the team will operate.

  Location: Address and phone number, 1-800 number

- Media headquarters

  This is the location where the media will be invited to receive any updates

  Location: Address, web ex or skype info, and 1-800 number

In the event that the crisis management team headquarters location cannot be used, the alternate location is the following branch office:

Address and 1-800 number

The initial crisis management team members are listed in Appendix A, along with contact information.

Spokesperson media training

Once the crisis management team is identified, the next step is to define key spokespeople that may be used during a crisis. Staff must be prepared to talk to the media once a crisis occurs. Public relations staff will continue to serve as the key media contact and facilitator
during a crisis, however, the media may prefer to speak to staff more directly involved or knowledgeable about the crisis. The role of the spokesperson is to

- ensure that media receives timely and factual information,
- provide the media with a single, consistent source of material that has been cleared for release,
- minimize the possibility that contradictory statements will surface,
- reduce the public’s fear and anxiety through unemotional, factual reporting, and
- place events in perspective and explain technical matters to the general media.

Public relations staff will conduct crisis media training for identified staff before and during a crisis.

During a prolonged emergency situation, staff may be needed to assist in handling various communications tasks related to the communications function. Depending on the nature of the crisis, press escorts or press conferences may need to be arranged. Staff will identify the appropriate staff to greet and escort the media while on company property, coordinate arrival time with security guards, and serve as couriers to relay information from the scene of the incident to press room, answer telephone calls, and conduct interviews.

Spokespersons identified for crisis media training, as well as contact information to be used during a crisis, are identified in Appendix B.

**Pre-drafted messages and communication tools**

As previously mentioned, it is critical for organizations to act swiftly once a crisis occurs, even if they do not have all of the information to fully react. Stakeholders want to hear that the organization is listening and that they plan to respond. Therefore, in order to minimize delays during initial crisis response, specific crisis communication templates should be drafted for
immediate dissemination after a crisis has occurred. These messages should focus on acknowledging the issue and assuring stakeholders that the organization is collecting information for a full response. Pre-drafted crisis messages buy the organization time by initially acknowledging the crisis while giving the organization time to assess the situation and implement the appropriate response strategy. Organizations that do not disseminate initial messages, choosing to wait until they have all of the information before they respond, run the risk of appearing ignorant, arrogant, or uncaring.

Early messages should focus on providing instructing information, directing stakeholders on what they or the organization need to do in order to remain safe or secure. The messages should also clearly state when the next communication update will be provided and if possible, include information on where further updates will be posted. Pre-drafted templates for use once a crisis immediately hits are included in Attachment C.

To ensure seamless and efficient deployment of crisis communication updates, the organization should develop a “dark” web site/intranet and/or phone number that can be turned on and used specifically for crisis communication to internal and external stakeholders during a crisis. This will help streamline all communication into one place, allowing for easy access by all stakeholders.

In addition, to ensure quick dissemination of information, key data and resources should be easily accessible.
The following background information will be provided and kept on file

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Background information</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fact sheet on locations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fact sheet/FAQ on xyz organization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of employees per location</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Description of facility/location</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Type of operation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Safety record</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Photo file of building including aerial views and ground shots</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Key audiences/stakeholders**

It is critical that xyz organization maintains an understanding and a record of key stakeholders and publics that may need to be communicated with once a crisis occurs. The list of appropriate stakeholders will vary depending on the type and severity of the crisis. As such, the appropriate stakeholders must be considered when the tactical communication elements of the plan are deployed.
Key stakeholder groups may include

**Internal Audiences**
- [ ] Employees
- [ ] Board of directors
- [ ] National office
- [ ] Other clubs

**External Audiences**
- [ ] Crisis victims
- [ ] Members
- [ ] News media
- [ ] First responders (police and fire etc)
- [ ] Government officials/elected leaders
- [ ] Site neighbors
- [ ] Vendors/partners
CRISIS PHASE

As previously mentioned, once a crisis occurs, organizations need to act swiftly in order to minimize reputational damage. However, an organization’s success will greatly hinge on the pre-crisis preparation and their ability to quickly assess the crisis and select the most appropriate response strategies. An effective theoretical and evidence based tool to assist organizations in this effort is the situational crisis communication theory (SCCT). This theory provides a solid foundation for identifying the crisis type in order to select the most effective response strategies.

In addition, understanding where the public may assign blame is also a key factor in effective crisis response. Attribution theory, therefore, will provide a useful framework for explaining the relation between a situation and the selection of communication strategies. The consideration of this theory will serve to assist the organization in its ability to accurately predict the public’s reaction to the crisis and to assist in confirming the appropriate response strategies.

Further crisis identification

Initially identifying crisis type is only one aspect of determining overall crisis impact. In total, four elements must be considered before the organization can appropriately identify the crisis.

By identifying crises and categorizing them initially into one of three clusters: victim, accident, and preventable, the organization saves time by initially assessing crises.

In order to accurately assess the crisis, all of the available facts must be considered at the outset of the crisis. Any evidence that demonstrates the crisis was actually preventable versus an accident, will likely surface at some point, causing further damage to the organization if it was less than transparent with the facts. The effectiveness of the response strategies is based on the accuracy of the crisis identification. Any attempt to ignore or distort the facts to change it to a
lesser damaging crisis type will only ensure the wrong response strategies are selected and the response plan is ineffective at mitigating damage.

Therefore, when confirming crisis type, the following questions must be considered:

- Is the crisis true as presented? If so, what facts demonstrate this? If not, what facts contradict this?
- What role did we play in the crisis?
- Were other parties involved in the crisis and if so, what role did they play?
- Could we have taken any measures to prevent the crisis? Did we take these prevention measures?
- Are we responsible in any way for the crisis?
- Were there any injuries, loss of life, or financial hardship incurred by the parties?

Answers to these questions will help the crisis manager determine if the initial crisis category is appropriate, or if it needs to be moved to the next severe crisis category.

**Crisis severity, history, and relationship**

Additional considerations must be given regarding crisis severity, crisis history, and relationship history prior to the selection of the appropriate response strategy. In addition to identifying the crisis type, the severity level of the crisis will help guide selection of the appropriate response strategies. A crisis without any injuries or financial damage poses less organizational risk than a crisis with severe injuries or other damage.

Information about past crises is also a significant factor that can affect performance of a more recent crisis. In fact, research has demonstrated that a history of past crises will intensify
the attributions of crisis responsibility and increase negative feelings about the organization. In addition, a favorable relationship history between the organization and its stakeholders may serve as a buffer against damage caused by a crisis. As such, when relationship history is negative, stakeholders are likely to view crises more negatively. The media may also pay particular attention to an organization that has a crisis history, as a company’s rap sheet makes a new crisis much easier to tell.

Any factors involving crisis severity, history, and relationship would then intensify reputational damage and the crisis may be moved to a more damaging crisis cluster and response plan.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Crisis Type</th>
<th>Crisis History</th>
<th>Relationship History</th>
<th>Crisis Severity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

**Crisis attribution**

Attribution theory asserts that people make judgments about the causes of events, often seeking a party to blame if the event had negative outcomes. Therefore, when an organizational crisis occurs, stakeholders will likely assign various levels of attributions towards all parties.
involved. If stakeholders determine that the organization had a greater level of responsibility, then strong feelings of anger and resentment will likely occur and the crisis is considered to be a greater threat than originally assumed.

Three factors are typically employed when assessing attribution: stability, external control and personal control. Stability refers to the frequency of the event; if it is rare, it’s unstable, but if it has occurred repeatedly, it is stable. If outside factors control a person, strong external control exists. Personal control reflects whether the event may be controlled or uncontrolled by the parties involved. These three factors help a person determine if the crisis was mainly caused by the organization or by external factors.

Crisis managers must consider all intensifying and attribution factors when making a final determination on crisis type. If intensifying factors are present or attributions are strong, the next level of crisis type must be considered in order to select the most appropriate strategy.

Selecting a crisis response strategy

Once the crisis type is accurately identified with all intensifying and attribution factors considered, the crisis response strategies may be selected. The response strategies provide the crisis manager with a toolkit and framework.

As of the drafting of this plan, xyz organization does not have a crisis history with its stakeholders and the relationship history with stakeholders is positive. Therefore, these additional considerations would not negatively impact the initial crisis assessment.
for which to use in response to the strategy. In order to minimize reputational damage from the crisis, the crisis manager must match the crisis type with the appropriate crisis response strategy. The response strategies begin with the least accommodating messages and tactics and become progressively more accommodating depending on the severity of the crisis, as more severe crises require more complex messaging. As previously mentioned, if intensifying factors are present, then the response strategy is moved to the next severe level.

Below are the three crisis response categories

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Deny</th>
<th>• Convincing stakeholders there is no crisis</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Diminish</td>
<td>• Have stakeholders see the crisis as less negative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rebuild</td>
<td>• Have stakeholders see the organization more positively</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Below is a table of response strategies by crisis type:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Victim--Deny</th>
<th>Accident--Diminish</th>
<th>Preventable--Rebuild</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>❌ attack the accuser</td>
<td>❌ provide an excuse</td>
<td>❌ ingratiation towards stakeholders</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>❌ deny a crisis exists</td>
<td>❌ minimizing responsibility</td>
<td>❌ expressing concern or care</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>❌ clarify why no crisis exists</td>
<td>❌ claim lack of control around event</td>
<td>❌ reminding of past good deeds</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>❌ claim no intent to do harm or provide justification</td>
<td>❌ offering support or remediation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>❌ clarify minimal damage</td>
<td>❌ offering an apology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>❌ showing how the organization will change</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Crisis that fall into the victim cluster would engage the deny option, as crisis attribution is very low and the crisis represents only a mild reputational threat. Crises that fall into the accidental cluster have a greater likelihood of crisis responsibility, so the diminish option may be used. Lastly, crises in the preventable cluster produce very strong attributions of crisis responsibility with severe reputational threat so the rebuild option is most appropriate. Using the deny option is risky and should only be used if organizations can prove they had no crisis responsibility, such as false accusations. Organizations that use the deny option without significant proof may actually do more harm than good, as denial strategies may actually keep the crisis alive.
Below is a helpful tool to determine most appropriate response strategy, based on crisis severity and attribution levels.

Additional response strategy considerations are listed in Appendix E.

**Initial Response**

When a crisis occurs, stakeholders expect an organization to act swiftly. Organizations must acknowledge the crisis, even if they do not have all of the facts. Typically, an organization should provide an initial response no later than two hours after a crisis has occurred. In most cases, this response may simply state acknowledgement, that the organization is gathering all the facts, and the timeframe for the next update. It is critical that the organization provide a timeline when the next response will be available. For severe crises involving a threat to personal
security or safety, all early response messages should provide instructing information providing steps stakeholders need to take to safeguard themselves.

One of the first steps the crisis manager should take once a crisis occurs is engaging the crisis management team. The team should meet initially to review the facts available regarding the crisis, confirm crisis type, and select the most appropriate response strategy. The team should wait to gather as much facts as possible before selecting the final response strategy, as emerging facts may change the initial assessment. Once the response strategy is selected, the team should establish regular check-in meetings to provide status updates, review communication updates, and discuss next steps. Depending on the crisis type, the team should also engage the dark web site, hotlines, and crisis communication team and media headquarters.

**Communication tools and audience**

The crisis management team should consider all impacted internal and external audiences when developing communication messages. The news media, while an important tool for disseminating information broadly, should not be over-relied on as a public communication tool. In addition, depending on the crisis, internal audiences should receive key communication prior to external audiences, to minimize confusion and ensure message consistency across channels. Internal audiences should also be reminded of xyz organization’s media policy which states that only public relations professionals and those designated by the public relations team are authorized to speak to the media.

Below is a list of available communication tools to consider by audience
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Internal Audiences</th>
<th>External Audiences</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>[ ] Outlook distribution lists</td>
<td>[ ] Mass media</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[ ] Memos for offsite staff/stakeholders</td>
<td>[ ] External web site or &quot;dark&quot; site</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[ ] Team meetings</td>
<td>[ ] Branch offices and fleet locations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[ ] Internal hotline</td>
<td>[ ] Social channels</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[ ] Club intranet</td>
<td>[ ] email newsletters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>[ ] Hotline</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>[ ] Mail/fax/memos</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Tips for timely, accurate and channel-appropriate responses

- Acknowledge the problem immediately. Maintain a dialog even if a complete response cannot be provided immediately.
- Respond where the crisis initiated (if the crisis was initiated on Facebook, respond first on Facebook then on other channels).
- Use a personal voice to convey the agreed upon messages. Avoid using the same response to every poster on a topic.
- Create a Crisis FAQ web page/microsite. Put all the crisis information in one place and update regularly and as promised.
- Think carefully before deleting negative comments on any channel.
- Only state what is known; do not speculate.
- Arm your army. Keep all (or appropriate) employees informed about the crisis.

Post-crisis response

Once the crisis has immediately passed, the role of the crisis manager is not over. Additional follow-up communication and actions may be necessary in order to repair reputational damage, depending on the crisis type and response strategies. How does an organization know when it has moved from the crisis phase to post crisis phase? While there isn’t a firm delineation, the best way to identify this transition is when the organization has returned mostly to normal business operations and is no longer primarily focused on the crisis.

During the post-crisis phase it is important to fulfill any obligations or commitments made during the crisis. Any follow up information, remediation steps, or promised organizational changes must be carried out during this phase and communicated to stakeholders in a timely manner. Stakeholders often have a lucid memory in regards to promises made by organizations.
during a crisis, and they will typically hold these organizations accountable for their commitments and remember those who don’t keep their promises.

Below are key steps an organization should take in the post-crisis phase, depending on response strategies used during the crisis

• Immediately convene the crisis management team to provide a post-mortem of the crisis response, including:
  o Make copies of all tweets, status updates, emails, letters, etc.
  o Analyze website traffic patterns.
  o Analyze search volume patterns.
  o Where did the crisis break, and when? Where did it spread, and how?
  o How did the internal notification work?
  o How did the response protocol work?
  o Did specific customers rise to your defense? (thank them!)
  o Were employees informed?

• Review and confirm all commitments made during the crisis in order to identify priorities and timelines.

• Provide regular communication updates to impacted stakeholders informing them of actions the organizations and the timeline of actions.

• Clearly state any follow-up or steps stakeholders need to take to minimize further risk or to be made whole after the crisis (filing forms, calling hotlines, ordering new credit cards, etc).

• Continue to provide communication updates to stakeholders as progress occurs during post-crisis, reinforcing the organizations’ commitment to them.
• Convene the crisis management team for a final post-mortem on the crisis communication plan and make adjustments to the plan as necessary.

• Keep a pulse on stakeholder attitudes and opinions by conducting polls/surveys to assess short and long-term impact on reputation.
Chapter 5. SUMMARIES AND CONCLUSIONS

As demonstrated, the not-for-profit discussed in this project is in dire need of a crisis communication plan. Due to the nature of its business, the organization is at risk of experiencing mild, moderate, or severe crises. Continuing to operate the business without an effective crisis communication plan poses a tremendous risk to the organization’s reputation and overall health. Although the organization recently created a sound business recovery plan in the event business operations are disrupted, the lack of a corresponding crisis communication plan is a glaring weakness.

To minimize reputational damage, the organization must be prepared to respond quickly, accurately, and responsibly after a crisis occurs. This plan was created to fill this void and will be presented to the organization for implementation. Using SCCT and attribution theories as the foundation, the key concepts and framework included in the plan should enable crisis communication managers to quickly understand and adopt the plan.

LIMITATIONS OF THE PROJECT

Although this plan’s foundation is firm as it springs from crisis communication literature and theories, limitations of the plan may still exist. For example, this plan is not intended to serve as a crisis management plan. A crisis management plan exists to uncover weaknesses in the organization that may provide fertile grounds for future crises and to create a business plan to address these weaknesses. Its’ aim is to ensure the organization’s business practices and processes are sound. This crisis communication plan is limited to identifying potential crises and providing appropriate response strategies; it is not to be used as an organizational fix for these weaknesses.
In addition, a plan is only effective if it is implemented correctly. If professionals fail to follow the recommended steps, the success of the plan will be limited. In addition, the effectiveness of the response strategies relies on the ability to properly identify the crisis and determine crisis type. If professionals fail to acknowledge or properly understand a crisis, any strategies deployed may be only minimally effective, or they may backfire on the organization. In addition, the success of the plan largely depends on the organization’s transparency and honesty in regards to the facts surrounding the crisis; therefore, any attempt to dodge this responsibility will likely result in failure.

Although this plan is based on sound theory and implementing it correctly is likely to minimize reputational damage, success cannot be guaranteed. Since the news media largely shape the story, even the most appropriately and accurately crafted crisis messaging may not remain intact in the final news story. In addition, there is no guarantee that stakeholders will respond or react as desired. While the plan includes strategies aimed at minimizing these results, these are limitations of all crisis communication plans.

Lastly, in order for the plan to remain sound and effective, annual updates of this plan are imperative. Therefore, this plan is considered to be the first iteration which will require updates moving forward.

**FURTHER RECOMMENDATIONS**

In order for this plan to remain effective, it must be routinely reviewed and updated, at least annually. Contact information, key distribution lists, and identified team members should be updated and maintained on a more routine basis. Additionally, it is recommended that this plan be considered in tandem with the organization’s business continuity plan, to ensure that crisis communication is a permanent consideration within the context of business continuity.
Lastly, it is recommended that the organization reconsider the social media crisis communication plan in order to determine if it makes sense to merge both plans into a single crisis communication plan. The rationale for this recommendation is that a crisis is a crisis, regardless of the medium in which it occurs. While the medium may influence the response tactics, it doesn’t change the overall approach to crisis identification and response strategy.
References


Retrieved from


http://www.prsa.org
Appendix A

Crisis management team

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dept</th>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Contact info</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Public Relations</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Human Resources</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facilities</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business Recovery/Audit</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Legal</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information Technology</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Finance</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Member Relations</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internal Communications</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Impacted Business Line Unit</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix B

Spokespeople for crisis media training

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dept/Business Area</th>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Contact Info</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CEO</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CFO</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Human Resources</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information Technology</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business Line Owners</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Appendix C

These message templates are to serve as an initial acknowledgement of the crisis and should be sent/posted on channels within two hours of crisis to internal and external stakeholders.

Statement on fire emergency

The organization conducted an orderly evacuation of its building at xxx today in response to a fire emergency. The County Fire Department responded to the emergency and is conducting an investigation at this time. Any questions concerning the investigation should be directed to the County Fire Department. The organization does not anticipate any disruption in service to members and is operating on contingency plans prepared in advance of today's incident. (if needed) another update will be provided at xx pm today.

Statement on bomb threat

The organization conducted an orderly evacuation of its building at xxx today in response to a bomb threat. Details of the incident have been turned over to the County Sheriffs office for investigation. Any questions concerning the incident should be directed to the sheriff's
office. The organization experienced no disruption in member service as a result of today's incident.

Statement on weather disruption

In response to a (monsoon/flash flood, haboob, lighting strike) issued by the National Weather Service, the organization has evacuated all non-emergency personnel from its building at xxx. Employees should not report for work until the storm has passed or the warning has been lifted. Employees may telephone the Employee Hotline (xxx-xxxx) for information on work schedules. The organization does not anticipate any disruption in service to members and is operating on contingency plans prepared in advance of the evacuation.

Statement on building disturbance

The County Sheriffs office responded to a disturbance today at the organization’s location at xxx. The incident is under investigation and any questions should be directed to the sheriffs office. (if needed) an update will be provided by xxpm/as soon as we have more information.

General statement

Today, we learned that {insert crisis here} occurred. Member satisfaction/public safety/employee safety/etc is our top priority. We are currently investigating this incident and will provide an update by {insert time/number of hours} via web site/employee web site/media statement/social media page. In the meantime, please {insert any instructing information}. 
Appendix D

Suggested equipment list

The following equipment must be available to Public Relations departments during a short-term building evacuation incident:

- cell phones,
- cell phone chargers,
- two large "media" signs and easels,
- national and local media list with phone and fax numbers,
- national office public relations staff contact numbers,
- stationery and basic office supplies,
- tape recorder,
- organization facts sheets
- generic media statements serving to acknowledge crisis and provide timeline for future updates,
- talking points,
- laser printer,
- land phone lines,
- fax lines, and
- lap top with wireless access to email and internet and Skype or web ex access.

In addition, the crisis management team headquarters and the media headquarters will also need to be equipped with:

- dedicated phone line,
- dedicated web ex or skype line,
- telephones,
- cell phones,
- cell phone chargers,
- chairs,
- multiple electrical outlets,
- laptop computer

Appendix E

As a general rule, consider the following response strategies

- For crises with minimal attributions of crisis responsibility and no intensifying factors, instructing information and care response is sufficient.
- For crises with medium attributions of crisis responsibility and an intensifying factor, add excuse and/or justification strategies to the instructing information and care response.
- For crises with medium attributions of crisis responsibility and an intensifying factor, add compensation and/or apology strategies to the instructing information and care response.
- For crises with strong attributions of crisis responsibility, add compensation and/or apology strategies to the instructing information and care response.
- The compensation strategy is used anytime victims suffer serious harm.
- The reminder and ingratiation strategies can be used to supplement any response.
- Denial and attack the accuser strategies are used only for rumor and challenge crises.