Crisis PR
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Chapter 2:
Crisis communication definition

Learning outcomes

Students will be able to demonstrate an understanding of crisis communication theory and practice and an understanding of relevant literature.

The online Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines “crisis” this way:

1 a: the turning point for better or worse in an acute disease or fever
   b: a paroxysmal attack of pain, distress, or disordered function
   c: an emotionally significant event or radical change of status in a person’s life <a midlife crisis>
2: the decisive moment (as in a literary plot)
3 a: an unstable or crucial time or state of affairs in which a decisive change is impending; especially: one with the distinct possibility of a highly undesirable outcome <a financial crisis>
   b: a situation that has reached a critical phase <the environmental crisis>

(http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/crisis)

In March 1979 the nuclear reactor meltdown at the Three Mile Island facility on the banks of the Susquehanna River ten miles from Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, rocked the nation and the world. Beginning on September 29, 1982, and for several days afterwards, seven people died in the Chicago area after taking cyanide-laced capsules of Extra-Strength Tylenol, Johnson & Johnson’s blockbuster pain reliever. On December 3, 1984, a deadly leak of the gas methyl isocyanate from the Union Carbide plant killed more than 2,000 people in Bhopal, India.

These three major events called attention to the need for more robust understanding of and preparation for business crises. In 1986 Steven Fink defined the phenomenon this way:
Chapter 3: Crisis model and stages

Learning outcomes

Students will be able to demonstrate an understanding of crisis communication in multinational corporations.

In developing conceptual models for crises, many professionals and scholars have turned to medicine for examples. The Triage Model was used during World War I on the battlefield by medical corpsmen to determine the severity of casualties, and thus determine the appropriateness of the response. The first of the three categories determined that the wounded could be “treated and released” with little effort and time. At the other end of the spectrum there were those whose wounds were so severe that no amount of effort could make a difference, so little if any effort was expended. Finally, there were those who would be likely to recover if something was done immediately.

Similarly, corporations can experience minor crises and return to business as usual in very little time. Such crises rarely make news. On the other hand, there are company-destroying crises, such as the one that took Enron from a “most respected” status, to extinction in a matter of days. Then there are the crises that companies overcome and have often increased reputation and added positive perception, such as the J & J Tylenol Crisis in 1982, or the Toyota brake failures in 2010 to record profits in 2015.

Then there are identifiable stages of a crisis as it develops. For example, the Centers for Disease Control has identified a crisis and emergency risk communication (CERC) lifecycle and the five phases through which a crisis evolves: pre-crisis, initial phase of the crisis, crisis maintenance, crisis resolution, evaluation.
Chapter 10: Leading practices

Learning outcomes

Students will be able to examine internal and external crisis communication types and functions; demonstrate an understanding of business functions and their importance for crisis communication; use crisis communication tools and techniques; demonstrate an understanding of crisis communication theory and practice; and demonstrate an understanding of crisis communication in multinational corporations.

The Business Roundtable’s Crisis Communication Toolkit (2002) identified these Leading Practices:

- Stewardship of the Crisis Communication Plan (keeping it current and updated; accountability of team members; responsibility in job description and performance reviews)
- Team members actively involved in writing the plan (notify staff, media and web monitoring, draft press releases, log and respond to media calls, press conferences, designate spokesperson)
- “Holding Statements” and “Dark Website”

Leading practices also include the capability to demonstrate a clear understanding of the continuum of reputation, issues management, and crisis management is built on a positive corporate culture. Sustainable organizations exhibit a robust corporate culture along a continuum of strategies from reputation management, to issues management, to crisis management.

They understand what a crisis is. They are able to adapt various crisis models and stages to their business position and environment. They can accurately identify the many different types of communication crises, and respond appropriately to each.
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About the author

Michael B. Goodman, PhD, is Professor and Director of the MA in Corporate Communication at Baruch College, City University of New York, and Director of CCI Corporate Communication International. He is Visiting Professor at Aarhus University (Denmark), Hong Kong Polytechnic University, and Università IULM (Italy). He has published widely, with works including Corporate Communication: Strategic Adaptation for Global Practice and Corporate Communication: Critical Business Asset for Strategic Global Change. He has been a consultant to more than forty corporations and institutions on corporate communication, managerial communication, problem-solving, new business proposals, change, and corporate culture.
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