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The value of communication during a crisis: Insights from strategic communication research

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Abstract The field of strategic communication encompasses a burgeoning crisis communication literature that seeks to identify effective and ineffective crisis communication efforts. Strategic communication has identified an array of crisis response strategies and the factors that determine when these response options are effective or ineffective. This article extracts key lessons from the crisis communication research to develop a set of guidelines managers can use to inform their crisis communication efforts. The analysis includes an examination of the crisis response strategies and their desired outcomes, the timing of crisis responses, and the situational factors that have proven to affect the effectiveness of crisis response strategies. The research results provide the foundation for evidence-based crisis communication. The guidelines help managers to understand how their communicative choices will impact the corporate reputation and other important crisis outcomes, and will help managers to make informed choices about crisis communication.

1. Crisis communication

On July 6, 2013, a Canadian Pacific Railway locomotive carrying crude oil derailed in Lac-Mégantic, Quebec, Canada. The ensuing explosions and fires resulted in 42 deaths, five people missing and presumed dead, and evacuation of the town. Edward Burkhardt, the CEO of parent company Rail World Inc., proved a key point about crisis communication: just because you communicate during a crisis does not mean you necessarily make the situation better. In fact, a leading business journal noted that Burkhardt's coping tactics made the situation *worse* for the organization. Crisis communication should be strategic; efforts should be designed to improve the situation for stakeholders and the firm in crisis. What was Burkhardt's Achilles heel? As this article will demonstrate, the problem was ineffective crisis communication.

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I will resist use of the label 'best practices' for crisis communication. Best practices implies benchmarking and uniformity in a process. While we can identify crisis types and similarities between crises, it is misleading to assume uniformity. Each crisis has the potential to create unique communication demands. What we *can* identify are lessons from the strategic communication analyses of crisis that produce consistent results. The evidence-based crisis communication research provides guidance regarding what is typically effective and ineffective in a crisis. As a whole, this guidance can help crisis managers make informed decisions about the strategic use of communication during their own crises.

The explication of evidence-based crisis communication will begin with an examination of basic crisis response strategies, move on to a discussion of crisis communication outcomes, and end with consideration of how various situational factors affect the effectiveness of basic crisis response strategies. This final section reviews primary lessons derived from the strategic crisis communication research.

2. Crisis response strategies

Crisis response strategies represent the words and actions managers employ in dealing with crises (Coombs, 2007). We can view crisis response strategies as the options crisis managers have available to them when responding to a crisis. The strength of the strategic communication approach to crisis communication is the explication of crisis response strategies. Crisis response strategies are only part of the larger fabric of crisis communication. Broadly, there are two strategies for crisis communication: (1) managing information and (2) managing meaning. Managing information involves the collection and dissemination of crisis-related information. Managing meaning involves efforts to influence how people perceive the crisis and/or the organization involved in the crisis (Coombs, 2010). Crisis response strategies are primarily about managing meaning. Hence, the discussion of crisis response strategies must consider the effects the crisis response strategies are intended to have upon stakeholder perceptions of the crisis situation. Crisis response strategies can be divided into three categories: instructing information, adjusting information, and reputation repair.

2.1. Instructing information

Instructing information helps stakeholders to protect themselves physically from a crisis. Crises create a unique set of stakeholders: victims that are negatively affected by the crisis. Instructing information prevents stakeholders from becoming victims (Sturges, 1994) by warning people to evacuate, to not use a product, or to shelter-in-place. The strategic objective is public safety.

2.2. Adjusting information

Adjusting information includes efforts to help stakeholders cope psychologically with a crisis (Sturges, 1994). Expressions of sympathy, information about the crisis event, counseling, and corrective action are all variations of adjusting information. Crises can create anxiety (Jin & Pang, 2010) and anger (Coombs & Holladay, 2005). Information about the crisis event reduces anxiety by reducing ambiguity. Corrective action helps stakeholders by explaining how the organization is working to reduce the likelihood of a repeat of the crisis. Expressions of sympathy help to reduce anger while counseling helps with extreme anxiety.

2.3. Reputation repair

Reputation repair seeks to reduce the negative effects a crisis has on the organization's reputation and related assets. Reputation repair strategies can be organized into four groups: (1) denial, (2) reducing offensiveness, (3) bolstering, and (4) redress. Each strategy offers a slightly different means for reputation repair.

2.3.1. Denial

Denial seeks to sever any connection between the organization and the crisis, with the objective of establishing no responsibility. Simple denial argues that the organization is not involved in a crisis and that misperception links the two. An example would be a rumor (untrue information) about a crisis or confusing the organization with a similar firm that is experiencing a crisis. A scapegoating strategy seeks to shift the blame to another actor; here, the organization is connected to the crisis but lays fault upon another entity. Either way, if the organization is not responsible for a crisis, the crisis should not damage the organization (Benoit, 1995; Coombs, 1995). Less damage is inflicted on an organization if people believe the organization is not connected to the crisis.

It is important to note a critical caveat of the denial strategy. If an organization uses denial and then later is found to bear some responsibility for the crisis, damage inflicted upon the organization is intensified. Hence, manager should avoid using denial if they are at all unsure about the organization's true culpability. Moreover, stakeholders generally