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Crisis management and the discourse of renewal: understanding the potential for positive outcomes of crisis

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Abstract

This paper examines crisis discourse that emphasizes renewal and growth over issues of blame, responsibility, and liability. Three categories of renewal are discussed in light of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks. These categories include renewal based upon stakeholder commitment, commitment to correction, and core values. This paper concludes with crisis communication implications for both theory and practice.

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1. Introduction

When, on September 11, 2001, the World Trade Center towers crumbled and the Pentagon was violated, organizations of all kinds faced the dismal prospects of declining business and financial exigency. The most prominent organizational victims, at the outset, were the airlines. Along with accusations of incompetence, every major airline faced a precipitous drop in passenger traffic. Tens of thousands of employees were laid off. Travel agencies, hotels, catering services, the United States Postal Service, and even Congress were all dramatically disrupted by the September 11th events and by subsequent threats and the purposeful contamination of anthrax.

These unparalleled events in American history have created circumstances that call for unique renewal efforts for many organizations. The purpose of this paper is to examine the form and function of these novel renewal efforts. First, we consider renewal as a form of crisis

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communication. Next, we pose several questions that merit attention in the months and years to come. Finally, we discuss implications for renewal in a nation-wide crisis such as the terrorism currently confronting the United States.

For organizations, crisis most often conveys a fundamental threat to the very stability of the system, a questioning of core assumptions and beliefs, and risk to high priority goals, including organizational image, legitimacy, profitability, and ultimately survival.¹ Consequently, crisis-related discourse is most often about an organization or industry absolving itself from guilt and repairing its image. These post-crisis responses are principally framed within the rhetorical tradition of apology, or a discourse of defense where organizational spokespersons offer a “compelling counter description of the organizational outcomes.”²

Typically, this apologetic discourse focuses on one or a combination of strategic positions such as simple denial of the act, evasion of responsibility, reduction of the offensiveness, compensation, corrective action, and mortification designed to repair or restore image.³ Apologia is generally viewed as necessary following a crisis to reestablish damaged organizational legitimacy.⁴ This research is instrumental to understanding the rhetorical options open to organizations when questions of responsibility, compensation, guilt, and blame are privileged.

In some instances, however, the assumption of organizational wrongdoing does not arise as the dominant rhetorical imperative, and in these cases, there is an opportunity to replace the discourse of apology and defense with a more optimistic discourse of rebuilding and renewal. In this case, due to the type of crisis issues of responsibility, harm, victimage, and blame may be subordinate to a more optimistic discourse that emphasizes moving beyond the crisis, focusing on strong value positions, responsibility to stakeholders, and growth as a result of the crisis.

Hurst, for example, explains that renewal often involves connecting with the organization’s core values “to reconnect the past to the present, to rediscover the old in the new.”⁵ Such discourse, most often featured in the stories and responses to a crisis, may help liberate resources and energize efforts that emphasize the potentially positive aspects of a crisis. What follows are some key issues that relate to renewal in light of the September 11, 2001, tragedies in New York, Washington, DC, and Pennsylvania.

2. Organizational renewal and the terrorist attacks of 2001

Following a crisis with the magnitude of that which began for American organizations on September 11, renewal involves a rebuilding of confidence. In crises that can be traced to errors or misjudgment by the organization, confidence can be restored in the eyes of the public via corrective action. An organization simply pledges to take what it believes are the necessary steps to avoid similar crises in the future. Emphasizing these steps often quiets public alarm.

An all-consuming crisis that causes fear and overwhelming uncertainty for an entire population demands renewal efforts at a much more complex level. We contend that renewal efforts by American industry will require an emphasis on commitment to consumer well-being, a willingness to engage in protective innovations, and the ability to generate a message that transcends the fear that grips our country. Obviously, American industry is not solely responsible for rebuilding America’s confidence. Such organizations do, however, have a major stake in the nation’s ability to rebound from the crisis. Hence, their role is clearly worthy of analysis.

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