Second Edition

EFFECTIVE CRISIS COMMUNICATION

Moving From Crisis to Opportunity

Robert R. Ulmer
Timothy L. Sellnow
Matthew W. Seeger

Preface

The second edition of *Effective Crisis Communication: Moving From Crisis to Opportunity* supports the central thesis that crisis communication is not solely about managing crisis-induced threat, but it is also about creating the potential for opportunity, renewal, and growth through effective crisis communication. From a communication focus, crises are most often described as destructive, threatening, and negative events without any redeeming value. Consequently, communication following a crisis is often defensive and negative. In this case, organizations deny responsibility for the crisis, look for scapegoats to attribute responsibility, minimize the extent or impact of the damage, take a rigid legalistic approach, or say nothing at all. These types of responses have resulted in a declining confidence in our public and private institutions. Current crisis communication theory has effectively categorized strategies organizations employ to preserve their images and reputations.

The approach to crisis communication described in this book emphasizes the opportunities associated with crisis. This is certainly a mind-set shift. All crises carry a level of threat. However, we suggest that an organization experiencing a crisis also take the opportunity to learn from the event, communicate honestly and ethically, work to minimize harm for those most directly impacted by the crisis, and develop a prospective vision for the organization to move forward. This approach, which we describe as the Discourse of Renewal, suggests that organizations should enact strong, positive ethical core values and effective crisis communication principles to guide their crisis responses. If our Discourse of Renewal approach seems radical and unconventional, it is. However, as you will see in this book, we have tested this approach through many different case studies, crisis types, and contexts, including international applications.

As you read this book, you will notice that there are three sections. The first section discusses key lessons we believe are essential to responding to a crisis effectively. This section is comprised of four chapters. The first, defining crisis, examines what we believe is a threat bias in crisis communication research. Chapters 2–4 examine managing uncertainty, communicating effectively, and leading effectively during crisis. Each chapter contains 10 lessons to build communication competency in each area. These chapters provide theoretical and practical guidance about how to manage a crisis. The lessons in each chapter are useful for the researcher in considering topics for investigation and understanding. For the practitioner, the lessons serve as guideposts for developing crisis messages.

The second section of the book, Chapters 5–9, is comprised of extended cases organized by crisis type. Each case has a particular focus based upon the lessons described in the first section of the book. Your goal is to apply the lessons from the first section to the detailed cases in the second section of the book. For instance, Chapter 5 discusses the crisis type of industrial accidents. This chapter, like all of them in the second section of the book, has three cases. The first case focuses on managing uncertainty effectively, the second case emphasizes effective crisis communication, and the last case features effective crisis leadership. In each case, the reader is asked to make the call and apply the lessons described in the first section of the book to the case study. One should not just read the cases and move forward. Take time to answer the questions, and consider the decisions that the crisis communicators made to produce effective or ineffective responses. Taking time with the cases will help the crisis communication researcher analyze, consider, and evaluate theory and practice in these crisis communication case studies. Practitioners who spend some time answering the questions at the end of the cases will build a strong foundation for developing effective crisis communication skills.

The last section of the book, the opportunities, examines the role of organizational learning, risk communication, and ethical communication in creating opportunities following a crisis. These chapters provide suggestions for the reader to resist a threat bias in crisis communication and consider more mindfully the opportunities the crisis may produce. The last chapter of the book introduces our theory, the Discourse of Renewal, as an approach to effectively manage crises. Researchers can use this approach to test the viability of the theory across contexts and to assess the strengths and weaknesses of particular instances of crisis communication. Practitioners will be able to use the Discourse of Renewal to develop crisis messages and more fully consider risk and crisis communication policy decisions.

Theories help us understand and view the world around us in different ways. We view theory as a lens to help better understand the world around us. This book provides a new lens to examine crises of all types. We hope that our suggestions for effective crisis communication help the reader to expand and reconsider the way he or she views crises. We also hope that the cases we describe in the upcoming chapters provoke thoughtful debate and discussion about how people perceive and communicate about these events. Finally, we hope this book provides the impetus for an expanded understanding about research, practice, and policy in crisis communication.

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THE LESSONS

1

Defining Crisis Communication

We live in a society continually affected by natural disasters, such as hurricanes, tsunamis, and forest fires, and by organizational crises, such as food-borne illnesses, corporate malfeasance, and terrorism. Regardless of where you live or the kind of work you do, many different types of crises have the potential to significantly disrupt your life. No community and no organization, public or private, is immune from crises.

Since the first edition of this book, the world has continued to experience devastating crises of all types. In 2008, the United States experienced the largest economic crisis since the Great Depression. This crisis had a systemic effect and impacted every major bank in the financial system. The event created a ripple effect across the world and ultimately created a global recession (Sorkin, 2009). Beyond financial crises, Sanlu, a Chinese food company, was the source of an intentional food contamination outbreak in 2008 that had a global impact. The crisis was due to the food company adding excessive levels of melamine to boost apparent protein levels in milk powder products, including baby formula. The crisis led to 6 children dying and nearly 300,000 becoming ill worldwide. Beyond food-borne illness, we experienced a global public health crisis. During much of 2009, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the World Health Organization (WHO) were confronted with a pandemic H1N1 flu

outbreak that threatened the public health safety of much of the world. In addition to public health crises, the United States experienced a failed terrorist attack when a suicide bomber tried to detonate plastic explosives 20 minutes prior to a Northwest Airlines flight landing in Detroit, MI, on December 25, 2009. On January 12, 2010, Haiti experienced one of the most devastating earthquakes ever recorded, causing over 200,000 deaths and 300,000 injuries, leaving over 1,000,000 people homeless. Finally, on April 20, 2010, a BP oil rig exploded in the Gulf of Mexico, taking the lives of 11 workers and ultimately creating the largest environmental disaster in U.S. history. This is a very select sample of crises in the past 3 years. Clearly, we continue to experience devastating crises of all types and, as a result, the current need for effective crisis communication understanding and skills continues to grow.

Because of the prevalence of crises, organizations like the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), the CDC, local and state emergency management departments, and public health departments need professionals who have crisis communication skills. At the same time, more and more nonprofit and public organizations are recognizing the need for crisis communicators as part of their public relations, human resources, and leadership teams.

Some might ask, "Who would want to work in a depressing field studying negative crises?" We answer by saying crises are not intrinsically negative forces in society. In fact, our proposition is that crises can actually lead to positive outcomes. We see crises as opportunities for learning and improvement, viewing them as they are perceived in Chinese culture, where the symbol for crisis in the Mandarin language is interpreted as *dangerous opportunity* (see Figure 1.1). By their nature, crises are dangerous moments or turning points in an organization's life cycle;

Figure 1.1   The Chinese symbol for crisis