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Using Communication and Culture to Prevent Crisis: A Literature Review

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Using Communication and Culture to Prevent Crisis:

A Literature Review

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Author Note

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Abstract

In crisis communication research, it is generally accepted that organizational crisis is an inevitable reality. Most organizations now have a crisis communication plan in place. Not all of these plans, however, address the specific communication needs of internal audiences in times of crisis. In fact, scholars have noted a dearth in research about crisis communication best practices for internal audiences and much of the research available combines all internal stakeholders together as the same audience. It is not necessarily appropriate to treat stakeholders, internal or external, as a monolithic group as employees in particular have very different relationships with an organization. This literature review will address the emerging topic of internal crisis communication, particularly in regards to how organizational culture influences the effectiveness of crisis communication plans. Many studies of internal communication note the influence of organizational culture in times of crisis, but few address the gap in terms of effective crisis prevention and management. Also included in this literature review are recommendations for communication practitioners as well as notes for further topics of study.

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Introduction

In late 2015, powerhouse automotive brand Volkswagen found itself embroiled in scandal, with major media outlets reporting the company had cheated on emissions tests in the United States (Armstrong, 2015). While some industry professionals praised the relative effectiveness of Volkswagen's external communication during the crisis, Armstrong (2015) noted the one audience perhaps most impacted by the scandal appeared to be overlooked: the employees. Employees, arguably, are the people for whom the stakes are highest if an organization survives or fails, but they often fall lowest on the priority list of audiences to communicate with in times of crisis. Communication scholars have noticed this oversight as well. "In recent decades, crisis management and crisis communication research have developed into strong research fields, but so far the internal aspect has remarkably been neglected" (Heide & Simonsson, 2014, p. 129). This neglect speaks not just to an issue of crisis communication, but an overall need for research in how communication with employees and cultivation of a strong organization culture results in numerous benefits for an organization. "Internal communication is no longer a communication flow occurring inside the organizational boundaries, but it is an ingredient in the generation of reputation, loyalty, brand and business opportunity and it is expected to perform an enabling function" (Mazzei, 2014, p. 91). Employees often identify with the organization in which they work, creating a sense of shared ownership and an obvious investment in the organization's ongoing success. Through a strong organizational culture and strategic communication during a crisis, employees can feel empowered to act as advocates or ambassadors of their organizations, sharing positive perspectives with family, friends, neighbors and others in the community (Korn & Einwiller, 2013). Organizations may be able to lessen or even prevent crisis situations altogether if they are

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willing and able to employ strategic internal communication, devote resources to building a strong organizational culture, and train all members of management to be effective communicators.

Crisis Management and the Importance of Internal Communication

In crisis communication research, crisis events generally fall into the following categories: natural disasters, industrial accidents, intentional harm, and “other kinds of harm-inducing occurrences” (Seeger, 2006, p. 235). Within these crisis categories, an organization’s level of responsibility varies (typically low for a natural disaster but high for an accident or issue such as a product recall). Several crisis communication theories posit that an organization’s reaction can fall on a scale from complete self-interest to complete concern for others. Most organizational reactions will fall somewhere between these two extremes (Jeong, 2015). Coombs (2007) suggests an organization’s level of responsibility determines where an organization will fall on this scale, where those organizations with low responsibility can employ strategies and reactions that are more in line with advocacy/self-interest and those organizations with high (or perceived high) responsibility should use messaging that appears more in the accommodating/concerning range. An organization may also shift messaging during the course of a crisis as events unfold and new information is made available. Jeong (2015) states communication practitioners must be strategic in balancing “perceptions along with the needs of their client organizations in order to manage a crisis effectively” (p. 11542). These perceptions belong to both internal and external stakeholders of the organization, and can become problematic when organizations fail to see the distinctions between these different audiences. “Previous crisis communication research has primarily treated stakeholders as a monolithic

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entity without taking into consideration how a difference in stakes may have an impact on how external and especially internal stakeholders interpret, communicate and react to organizational crisis” (Frandsen & Johansen, 2011, p. 358).

In times of a crisis, organizational internal communication typically follows a predication pattern: the number of messages increases, the number of individuals communicating increases, the messages become shorter, individual networks expand, and the larger network becomes more interconnected (Murshed, Uddin, & Hossain, 2015). As a result, the communication networks within the organization become more dynamic and subject to structural changes during a crisis (such as clique formation, centralization of information/networks, and transfer of information across communication networks). For communication practitioners, internal communication must be a high priority during a crisis. An “efficient information flow is important to the reduction of uncertainty, which is important to the reduction of misunderstanding, disagreement, tension and conflict” (Murshed et al., 2015). Communication practitioners can encourage managers to develop and nurture informal relationships and informal communications, which can aid the facilitation of cooperation among individuals during a crisis period (Hossain, Murshed, & Uddin, 2012).

Developing Effective Internal Crisis Communication

While a majority of companies currently have a crisis plan in place (Johansen, Aggerholm, & Frandsen, 2012), not all crisis plans address internal communications. Of those plans addressing internal communications, most included a point person responsible for communicating with employees during a crisis. “Organizations that have established a crisis management team or appointed a crisis manager seem to experience loss of motivation and

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engagement to a lesser extent than organizations without this strategic instrument” (Johansen et al., 2012, p. 277). Internal communication during a crisis is critical for both ethical and practical reasons. Coombs (2007) recommends “the physical and psychological needs of the stakeholders be the top priority in a crisis” (p. 173). This may include physical safety and medical needs, as well as emotional support and reassurance. After immediate needs are addressed, employees then seek information about the crisis. “Organizations can sometimes exacerbate the impact of the crisis through poor communications...in such contexts, communication activities are often misinterpreted, resisted, or rejected by employees” (Mazzei & Ravazzani, 2011, p. 243). An effective internal communication strategy recognizes a need for information and sense-making among both managers and ‘rank and file’ employees during a crisis (Heide & Simonsson, 2014).

Internal crisis communication plans need not be complicated. Frandsen and Johansen (2011) noted internal crisis communication mimics many of the facets of traditional communication actions. Practitioners must ask themselves what information needs to be communicated, how it should be communicated, and what is the desired outcome of the communication to best develop a strategy for who receives what information and when. From there, organizations can outline communication methods and assign key roles to individuals in a formal communications department as well as within units across the organization. In times of crisis, employees may seek various communication channels and their preferences will vary from one individual to the next. In successful cases, “interpersonal communication was leveraged during one-to-one manager-employee meetings, training sessions, meetings with trade unions and meetings with the CEO involving all employees” (Mazzei & Ravazzani, 2011, p. 246). Several forms of communication can be used to reach employees, including formal channels (company-wide intranet, memos, training workshops) and informal channels (one-on-one

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meetings, small group discussions or ‘brain storming’ sessions, group huddles at the beginning or end of a shift).

Employees will then process the information provided, both formally and informally, and typically exhibit a need for further sense-making through discussions with their peers and other audiences. “Co-workers act on their understanding of a situation, which is socially constructed. Further, co-workers are both important ambassadors of the [organization] and communicators. They discuss the crisis with customers, suppliers, journalists, friends and so forth, and convey their picture of the crisis” (Heide & Simonsson, 2014, p. 131). Internal communication can positively influence these emotions and behaviors, allowing employees to feel prepared when friends, family and other external parties question them about a crisis (Korn & Einwiller, 2013).

Heide and Simonsson (2014) noted when communication practitioners have a significant role within the organization (i.e. access to the C-suite) as well as have informal relationships across organizational departments, employees view the practitioner’s key role in crisis management with more trust and authenticity. “It is often argued that crisis situations when the influence and value of communication professionals becomes evident,” (Heide & Simonsson, 2014, p. 138), but practitioners cannot necessarily be effective in that role if they are not previously viewed as having both authority and responsibility within the organization. Practitioners need access to employees to develop strong interdepartmental relationships in order to assume a successful key role within an organization during times of crisis. Practitioners with both access and authority can deliver effective messages as well as act as an example for communicative and organizational behaviors for other employees to model.

“Employees can be mobilized in crisis communication, not only as receivers but also as senders, just as they in the roles of internal or external stakeholders can act proactively in a crisis

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situation” (Frandsen & Johansen, 2011, p. 353). If employees have been provided with strategic information from both managers and crisis spokespersons, they will then be equipped to be ambassadors of the organization during a crisis. Employees can reiterate organizational messaging and positioning to family, friends, acquaintances, and others in their communities. In fact, employees may prove to be more effective as spokespersons of the organization because those audiences may view employees as a more neutral mouthpiece in the event of a crisis (Frandsen & Johansen, 2011). “Employees are the most effective advocates of a company’s reputations and a crisis is when the support of the work force/employee is critical” (Mazzei, Kim, & Dell’Oro, 2012, p. 32).

Without clear messages and information from the organization, employees can and will resort to other means of information gathering in times of crisis. This includes mass media outlets, both in traditional and online formats, along with social media networks (Korn & Einwiller, 2013). This can critically impact employees’ organizational identity and perception of organizational reputation, particularly as the media often serves as “crisis intensifiers” (Korn & Einwiller, 2013, p. 454). If internal communication is fast and transparent, employees are less likely to seek out information for mass media outlets, especially if the internal communications are presented quickly after news breaks. Internal crisis management may include “internal communication channels, internal spokespersons, management communication, guidelines or policies, employees as ambassadors and initiators of communication, psychological crisis counseling, and the role of external media coverage” (Johansen, Aggerholm, & Frandsen, 2012, p. 274). As Korn and Einwiller (2013) point out, many internal communication channels are relatively quick methods to inform employees, including an organization’s intranet (if available), official website, and conversations with colleagues in management and non-management roles.

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Korn and Einwiller (2013) further emphasize a need for a “well-prepared and powerful internal and external communications department,” particularly in times of crisis (p. 463). In some cases, positive internal communications may lessen the influence of negative external media coverage during times of organizational crisis.

Internal communications should also be integrated in training and coaching programs, should allow for spontaneous and genuine feedback, should provide opportunities for employees to be involved in decision-making processes, should include managerial listening, and should be accessible for all levels of personnel within an organization (Mazzei, 2014). Welch (2012) also recommends diversifying the methods through which practitioners deliver information in times of crisis and to consider “employees as a multi-dimensional set of diverse stakeholders rather than a single entity” (p. 253). In creating an internal crisis communication plan, practitioners need to recognize an ongoing need to communicate with employees in times of relative normalcy. Those practitioners who regularly use strategic tactics for employee communication and focus on internal relationship building will likely be more effective in deploying a communication plan in the event of a crisis (Heide & Simonsson, 2014, p. 131). “Gaining insight into what and how employees perceive and feel, and how they behave in a crisis will help to better understand the crisis process and create value for crisis communicators when developing strategies for internal crisis management and communication” (Korn & Einwiller, 2013).

Informing Organizational Culture

“Of all the possible resources a communication team can have, the organizational culture in which they practice communication is perhaps the greatest source of support” (Meng, 2014, p. 378). The primary goal of a communication practitioner is to build mutually beneficial

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relationships, and this includes the stakeholders internal to the organization and the overall culture among those stakeholders. Meng (2014) outlines attributes that lead to an environment of “flexible communication,” including collaboration, team building, ethical behavior, leadership, and proactive advocacy (p. 379). The communication practitioner can then act as a guide or compass for organizational culture, providing an environment where a strong and positive culture can thrive.

“People in organizations evolve in their daily interactions with one another a system of shared perspectives,” (Bate, 1984, p. 44). Bate (1984) suggests that these shared perspectives can either act as benefit or a drawback when an organization faces a need for problem-solving (Bate does not specifically address a crisis situation, but for the purposes of this discussion one can extrapolate that meaning from the context of ‘problem-solving’). If day-to-day interactions and communications cannot help but inform the organization’s culture, this implies cultural cultivation should then be a long-range component of an organization’s crisis communication plan. “Established structures, routines, procedures, rules, relationships, norms and belief systems often break down or are judged as insufficient given the conditions of the crisis” (Seeger et al., 2005), which infers even a strong and open organizational culture may struggle internally during times of crisis. An organization without a strong, collaborate culture is already at a disadvantage before a crisis begins. It is not uncommon for a crisis to disrupt formal communications, but a strong organizational culture may encourage effective informal communication methods during a crisis (Seeger et al. 2005).

Frandsen and Johansen (2011) refer to “organizational learning, and the impact of organizational culture or the ‘personalities of organizations’ on the organizations’ ability to handle a crisis” (p. 349). An organizational culture that values transparency, for example, may

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fair better in and after a crisis than an organizational culture where management is viewed as secretive or misleading. Mazzei (2014) stresses “all employees play a key communicative role” (p. 83). Strategic internal communications can also inform organizational culture by encouraging micro-boundary spanning, which allows employees to build their communication networks and share information. These interactions increase legitimacy for the communication practitioners, foster organizational trust, and build the overall reputation of an organization.

Important factors of successful crisis management, such as “shared culture, relationships of trust, communication practices” and more cannot be fostered during a crisis, they need to be in place within the organizational culture before a crisis occurs (Mazzei & Ravazzani, 2011, p. 252). To that point, Mazzei et al. (2012) discuss how “continuous managerial efforts and internal communication... would cultivate quality of relationships between company and employee publics and further influence employee communicative actions in crisis situations” (p. 31). Once an organizational culture is established, it is critical that organizations uphold this culture in times of crisis. Follow-through from managers and communications spokespeople will solidify that culture through internal communications strategies and information communications. “Continuous communication with employees about the crisis increased their awareness and reassured them... the stream of unambiguous messages resulted in attitudes of realism and trust among employees” (Mazzei & Ravazzani, 2011, p. 247).

Along with providing clear and consistent information, the organization must also “enable employees to have conversations in the marketplace, in their communities, with their neighbors” and more (Meng, 2014, p. 87). As previously discussed, utilizing employees as organizational ambassadors is an effective strategy to support crisis communication and management, even if done informally. Much of the research on internal communication suggests

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quality relationships between managers and employees will positively influence the communication behavior of employees during a crisis (Meng, 2014). This empowers employees to act as advocates or ambassadors for their organization. But this empowerment stems from an organizational culture in which employees positively interact with higher levels of management, regularly receive information and affirming messages, and strongly identify with the organization (Mazzei et al., 2012, Coombs, 2007, Frandsen & Johansen, 2011). In one case, a positive relationship history, investment in continuous internal communications, and policies guided by transparency all correlated to stronger employee identification and support of a company during and after a crisis. The existence of preventative policies also contributed to a strong positive relationship between an organization and its employees (Mazzei et al., 2012).

Organizational culture should become a strategic element of an organization's crisis plan, but this requires ongoing efforts to build and maintain a culture that will survive or even thrive in the face of a crisis. For an organization with a weak culture, however, it is still possible to use a crisis communication plan as leverage in this regard. Seeger et al. (2005) notes a "post-crisis discourse of renewal is more natural and honest," which can build (or rebuild) organizational culture in the aftermath of a crisis. While crises disrupt organization systems, sometimes to the point of being unable to conduct business, they also "disrupt the status quo in basic ways allowing for new assumptions, methods and organizational values to emerge. Many outdated assumptions, impediments, inertia and political resistance to change are removed during a crisis" (p. 92). This may allow organizations to implement changes to both the business and the culture that otherwise would have been impossible in times of relative normalcy.

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Preventing Crisis through Internal Communications and Organizational Culture

Taylor (2010) theorizes “one of the reasons that so many organizations experience a crisis is because there is a lack of communication and infrasystem convergence among organizational units” (p. 700). While Coombs (2007) states crisis is inevitable, Taylor (2010) perceives crisis as preventable, specifically through strategic internal communications. This highlights an important aspect of crisis communication plans: the ongoing need for strong employee communications in times of normalcy in addition to times of crisis. While all crises cannot and will not become completely preventable, organizational culture could reduce the likelihood of a crisis occur (or reoccurring). Taylor (2010) suggests reviewing “gaps in organizational relationships, restrictive infrasystems, and failed processes that stop organizations from catching problems before they become a crisis” (p. 703). Just as building mutually beneficial relationships are central to communication practitioners’ goals, “communication and relationships are at the center of this internal communication approach to crisis communication” (p. 703). This may involve moving outside of the day-to-day routines of the organization, which can be difficult. Such a review may entail asking detailed questions to various individuals about job responsibilities, which employees may view as suspicious or unwelcoming. For this process to be successful, employees need clear communication about the intent of the review process as well as the opportunity to provide feedback. In many ways, this process can mimic the progression of communication employees may receive during a crisis. To take this process a step further, a crisis drill or practice may help managers determine critical gaps in communication structures within the organization. Seeger (2006) includes “pre-event planning” as one best practice of crisis communication, largely in the context of risk assessment and analysis (p. 237).

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Once these gaps or discrepancies are uncovered, it is important for the organization to be proactive and implement changes. Heide & Simonsson (2014) notes “a general challenge is to maintain the awareness and not gradually accept the changes or anomalies as normal and innocuous” (p. 139). To that point, it is important that any findings of such a review are not brushed aside as being isolated incidents. When an event out of the ordinary occurs, employees need to feel comfortable approaching managers to discuss the issue. Facilitating a mindful and open culture may aid in the prevention or early detection of a crisis, and a strong internal communications strategy will assist an organization in being successful in this regard (Heide & Simonsson, 2014). Mazzei & Ravazzani (2011) also highlights a need for communication training for all managers. Employees appreciate opportunities to be heard and to give feedback; therefore managers must be equipped with communication tools for understanding these needs. Managers also need strong communication skills to avoid message misinterpretation among employees. Heide & Simonsson (2011) points to “the need for all coworkers to be competent communicators” (p. 202). Managers should receive professional development training and be required to bring that knowledge back to the working environment. In practice, “interpersonal communication should be strengthened through both planned manager-employee meetings and interpersonal networks for spreading communications” (Mazzei & Ravazzani, 2011, p. 252).

Recommendations for Communication Practitioners

1. Continue to advocate for communication practitioners to have executive-level access or positions. This legitimizes the role of the practitioners and the messages delivered (Heide & Simonsson, 2014).

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2. Crisis is inevitable (Coombs, 2007). All organizations should have a crisis plan and specifically a crisis communications plan.
3. Crisis communication plans need to address communication with internal audiences. Stakeholders are not monolithic. Internal communications need to address employees at all levels (Welch, 2012).
4. During a crisis, employees seek information that is timely, concise, and accessible. Providing employees with fast and accurate information serves two purposes:
 - a. Employees are less likely to seek out external information, such as mass media reports (Frandsen & Johansen, 2011).
 - b. Employees are more likely to act as advocates or ambassadors for the organization (Korn & Einwiller, 2013).
5. Organizational culture can act as a buffer to negative fallouts from crisis. Organizational culture is then critical to any crisis communication plan. Employees need to feel enabled to be ambassadors to the organization, and a communicative culture can foster this relationship identity (Meng, 2014).
6. Organizational culture, specifically internal communicative culture, could very well prevent a crisis altogether. Internal communications are a preventative measure to any crisis communication plan (Taylor, 2010).
7. Managers at all levels need to be trained as effective communicators. This includes various forms of professional development, such as personnel coaching and training workshops. “To be a good manager is to be a good communicator” (Mazzei, 2014, p. 88).

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Conclusion

In regards to the Volkswagen crisis, Armstrong (2015) offers several key strategies for the company to address its internal audiences, emphasizing two-way communication, allowing employees to openly express concerns, providing clear and timely information, equipping members of the workforce with tools to be ambassadors, and revisiting the company's shared culture. These recommendations echo the research of internal crisis communication and building an organizational culture of renewal in times of a crisis. Volkswagen may emerge as a case study of particular interest, as communication and public relation analysts are pointing to internal factors as a cause of the public emissions fraud crisis (Armstrong, 2015). Could an internal communications audit or risk assessment have prevented Volkswagen from missteps that lead to a crisis of international level? Those details may emerge in the future as more information is made public.

Research in the specific area of internal crisis communication is growing but still limited, indicating it is a topic of emerging interest as the ramifications of internal communication become clearer in respect to organizational culture and goals. Even within Seeger's (2006) ten best practices, employee communications are mentioned only once in conjunction with stakeholder and public communications and not as its own item or strategy. Within the literature including employee communication during crisis, it is frequently noted that strategic internal communication (both in times of crisis and in times of relative normalcy) can limit the extent of a crisis or even prevent one entirely. As Coombs (2007) states, organizations will face crisis, it is only a question of when. Internal communication cannot prevent ever crisis, but a strong organization culture can act as a mitigating factor in the severity of a crisis and its impact on organizational business. An overarching theme in current research of internal communication

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during a crisis is providing fast information to employees. In doing so, communication practitioners equip employees to assume the role of advocate or ambassador for the organization. During a crisis, employees “talk about their feelings and attitudes toward their workplace with their colleagues, families, and friends, some of them also give interviews or statements to the press as well as they choose to express their own opinion for instances through the new social media” (Frandsen & Johansen, 2011, p. 353). Further research on this subject should include how employee ambassadors, either official or unofficial, impact external audiences’ perceptions of an organization in times of crisis, as well as how internal culture can successfully empower and enable employees to assume this role. Additional study on how to integrate organizational culture into crisis communication plans in an intentional manner would also be helpful in establishing accepted best practices for internal crisis communication.

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