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Conceptualizing Crisis Communication

W. Timothy Coombs
Eastern Illinois University

On average, only one-eighth of an iceberg is visible above the water. About the same amount of crisis communication is visible to those outside of an organization in crisis. What we typically see are the public words and actions of an organization, the crisis responses. Perhaps the visibility of the crisis response is why the bulk of crisis communication research is dedicated to examining this topic. That leaves a broad spectrum of crisis communication under researched because crisis communication occurs throughout the crisis management process. Crisis management can be divided into three phases: pre-crisis, crisis response, and post-crisis. Pre-crisis involves efforts to prevent a crisis, the crisis response addresses the crisis, and post-crisis concerns the follow-up actions and learning from the crisis.

To conceptualize crisis communication we must look below the water and examine how communication is used throughout the crisis management process. The primary goal of crisis management is to protect stakeholders from harm and the secondary goals are to protect reputational and financial assets. The number one priority is protecting human life—the stakeholders. The best-managed crisis is the one that is averted. Hence there is the need for crisis prevention. It is imperative that stakeholders exposed to a crisis know what they need to do to protect themselves from harm, a part of the crisis response. The learning from a crisis helps to prevent future crises and to improve future responses.

A crisis can be viewed as the perception of an event that threatens important expectancies of stakeholders and can impact the organization's performance. Crises are largely perceptual. If stakeholders believe there is a crisis, the organization is in a crisis unless it can successfully persuade stakeholders it is not. A crisis violates expectations; an organization has done something stakeholders feel is inappropriate—there is *e. coli* in a food product or drink, the CEO siphons off millions of dollars, or the organization exploits child labor. In turn, the violated expectations place the organization's performance at risk. Production can be stopped or reduced, sales and stock prices can drop, and/or the organization's reputation can be eroded. Crisis management is a process that “seeks to prevent or lessen the negative outcomes of a crisis and thereby protect the organization, stakeholders, and/or industry from damage” (Coombs, 1999b, p. 4).

Crisis communication is composed of two related communication processes: (1) crisis knowledge management and (2) stakeholder reaction management. Crises create a demand for knowledge. The term knowledge is used to denote the analysis of information. Knowledge is created when information is processed. Managers utilize communication to collect and process information into knowledge. Crisis managers try to achieve what is often called situational awareness. Situational

awareness is when managers feel they have enough information to make decisions. Communication provides the knowledge the crisis team needs to make decisions. By understanding the crisis situation the crisis team can make decisions about what actions to take and what messages to communicate—formulate the crisis response. The decision making process itself is communicative. The decisions then must be communicated to the requisite stakeholders.

Part of understanding the situation is appreciating how stakeholders will perceive the crisis and the organization in crisis, especially their attributions of blame for the crisis. By understanding stakeholder perceptions, the crisis team is better prepared to manage stakeholder reactions to the crisis. Stakeholder reactions can deplete both reputational and financial assets. Communication is used in attempts to influence how stakeholders react to the crisis and the organization in crisis. Clearly, communication is woven throughout the entire crisis management process because of the demands to generate and disseminate crisis knowledge and the need to manage stakeholder reactions. This chapter considers the application of crisis communication to the entire crisis management process.

The chapter's structure follows the basic crisis management process: pre-crisis, crisis response, and post-crisis. The role of crisis communication at each phase of the crisis management process will be examined. The bulk of the chapter will focus on the crisis response phase because it is the most thoroughly researched phase of crisis management from a communication perspective.

PRE-CRISIS

Pre-crisis is composed of the actions organizations take before a crisis ever occurs. There are two components to the pre-crisis stage: (1) prevention and (2) preparation. Prevention tries to stop a crisis from developing while preparation readies people for the occurrence of a crisis.

Prevention

Crisis prevention is also known as mitigation. Prevention seeks to identify and to reduce risks that can develop into crises. A crisis risk is a weakness that can develop or be exploited into a crisis (Pauchant & Mitroff, 1992). A risk is the potential to cause harm. The risk has a probability of developing into a crisis/negative event. The magnitude of the damage resulting from a risk becoming a crisis is the threat level. Common sources of risk include personnel, products, the production process, facilities, social issues, competitors, regulators, and customers (Barton, 2001). Prevention has strong ties to emergency preparedness and reflects Fink's (1986) belief that all crises have warning signs or prodromes. A warning sign is an indicator that a risk is beginning to manifest itself into a crisis.

The most effective way to manage a crisis is to prevent it. Olaniran and Williams (2001) are among the few communication scholars to address prevention. Their anticipatory model of crisis management focuses on finding and reducing risks. Great crisis managers actively look for these signs and take action to prevent a crisis from materializing. However, prevention is easier said than done. Risks can be difficult to identify especially if people in the organization do not want them to be found. For example, people in organizations will try to hide information that makes them look bad or that is illegal. Enron and WorldCom are but two examples of this unfortunate fact.

Risk is often difficult to prevent. Prevention can take one of three forms: (1) eliminate the risk, (2) reduce the likelihood of a risk manifesting, and (3) reduce the threat of a risk. Eliminating a risk means you completely remove a risk. Many risks, such as those associated with personnel or geographic location, occur naturally and cannot be eliminated. No one can prevent hurricanes. However, an organization may be able to replace a hazardous chemical with a non-hazardous one thereby eliminating a risk. Steps can be taken to reduce the likelihood of a risk manifesting itself. Increased safety training and emphasis can reduce the likelihood of an accident. Finally, the magnitude of the threat from a risk can be reduced. One example would be storing smaller amounts of a hazardous chemical on site or storing the chemical in smaller, separate storage tanks in order to reduce the amount of damage that would occur if containment breach occurred.

Prevention assumes that the mitigation efforts will be effective. Management must determine if they should even attempt mitigation. The question is “Will the prevention efforts produce results?” If the reduction in the magnitude of the threat is small or has a minimal chance of being successful, management may choose not to attempt mitigation. Management needs to be fairly certain that the investment in mitigation will actually produce results. If mitigation is not a viable option, management should continue to monitor the risk carefully for signs of an emerging crisis.

Communication networks are the essential element in the prevention stage. The crisis team must create a vast communication network in order to collect as much risk-related information as possible. I term this the *crisis-sensing network* (Coombs, 1999a). The crisis team is creating what some would call a knowledge network or knowledge management. Wider networks collect more information and make the evaluation of the risk more accurate and effective. Risk information can be found in a variety of sources throughout the organization including production, safety, employee behavior, consumer responses and complaints, insurance risk audits, and regulatory compliance. Risk information is also found in the organization environment including policy concerns, activist hot buttons, and shifting societal values. Interpersonal communication is critical. The crisis team must talk to and cultivate relationships with a variety of internal and external stakeholders to form the crisis-sensing network.

The crisis team must be media savvy as well. The news media and the Internet must be scanned for signs of risks. By and large the Internet is a collection of odd information with little utility to an organization. However, nuggets of prized information can be gleaned from the myriad of web pages, discussion boards, and web logs (blogs). The difficulty is searching for the nuggets. Like miners in a stream, crisis managers must search through the worthless gravel for the pieces of gold. What poses a threat is not always immediately identifiable. Crisis sensing is an active search process. A crisis manager cannot assume the risks will find her or him. More attention should be given to the role of communication in crisis prevention.

Preparation

No organization can prevent all crises. Management must live with the reality that a crisis is a matter of “when” and not “if.” The sheer number and nature of threats/risks makes it impossible to eliminate them all. The preparation component readies the organization for the crisis. A crisis management plan (CMP) is created and exercises are used to test the CMP and to train the crisis management team. The CMP is a rough guide for how to respond to the crisis. The CMP pre-assigns responsibilities and tasks and that enables a quicker and more effective response. The team does not have to waste time deciding *what* to do and *who* will do it. The core of the CMP is a set of contact information for key people and organizations and set of forms for recording key actions and messages.

The forms serve as reminders of the basic tasks that must be completed and as a means for documenting what the crisis team has done and when those actions were taken. Most crises are likely to breed litigation, thus, documentation of the crisis team’s actions is important. Another use of forms is to track requests for information, most coming from the news media, and responses to those requests. Crises move at their own pace. Most crises move rapidly making it difficult to remember and to respond to all the inquiries. When crisis teams fail to respond to inquiries they appear to be disconnected from stakeholders or to be stonewalling. The crisis team may not yet have the requested information and promises to deliver said information when it does arrive. Forms documenting information requests make follow-up easier and more accurate. The crisis team will know who still needs to receive what specific pieces of information.

Some team members will also need spokesperson training. Certain team members must be able to answer media questions in a press conference format. Spokesperson training relies heavily on public speaking skills. An effective spokesperson must appear pleasant, have strong eye contact, answer questions effectively, and be able to present information clearly (free of jargon and buzzwords) (Coombs, 1999b).

Exercises simulate the crisis management process by focusing on collecting, analyzing, and disseminating crisis-related information as well as sharpening decision-making skills. Exercises determine if the CMP is effective or needs modification, if the crisis team members have the necessary skills for the task, and allows the crisis team to practice their communication skills. The communication skills of crisis team members include being able to engage in vigilant decision-making (including conflict management), being able to request information clearly, and being able to disseminate knowledge accurately. A real danger during all of this information gathering and exchange is serial reproduction error. Not all messages will be sent in writing, even with the extensive use of e-mail. The greater the number of people a message passes through before reaching its destination, the greater the likelihood the message will become distorted (Daniels, Spiker, & Papa, 1997). Crisis teams must recognize the potential for problems to arise as they collect and share information instead of assuming it a simple and rather error-free process.

A CMP in a binder and names comprising a crisis team roster are of little value if they are never tested through exercises. Exercises serve to simulate the crisis experience. It is an opportunity to learn the crisis management process in the safety of a controlled environment with out organizational resources being placed at risk. Exercises can range from simple tabletop exercises where the team talks through a crisis scenario to full-scale exercises where a crisis is re-created as realistically as possible. A full-scale exercise will involve the deployment of actual equipment to be used, people playing victims, and interactions with the real local emergency responders (Coombs, 2006a). Full-scale exercises are an opportunity to teach local stakeholders about the actions that the organization and they must take during a crisis. During a crisis, community members may be asked to evacuate an area or shelter-in-place (stay inside and try to seal the house from outside air). Community members need to understand when they must evacuate or shelter-in-place and how to enact each of these emergency procedures. In fact, most organizations do involve at least some community members when exercising chemical emergency responses (Kleindorfer, Freeman, & Lowe, 2000)

Preparation is one way that risk communication is tied to crisis communication, a point reinforced by this book. Risk communication is a process or dialogue between organizations and stakeholders. Stakeholders learn about the risks an organization presents and how they try to control those risks. The organization comes to appreciate stakeholder perceptions and concerns about risk (Palenchar, 2005). Crisis management preparation can be an indicator that the organization has taken some responsibility for the risk. Management has taken actions to prevent and be ready to respond to crises (Heath & Coombs, 2006). Research has shown that cooperative efforts to develop and implement emergency warning communication and response systems will generate support for the organization (Heath & Abel, 1996). Heath and Palenchar (2000) found that knowledge of emergency warning systems increased concern over risks while still increasing acceptance for the organization. Knowing about the emergency warning kept community member vigilant rather than lulling them into a false sense of security. Vigilance is preferable to complacency in a crisis. Participating in exercises or news media coverage of exercises can increase perceptions of control. Community members will realize that the organization has emergency plans and that those emergency plans will work.

The Extended Parallel Process Model (EPPM) can help to further explain the positive effect of exercises on community members. Kim Witte's (Witte, Meyer, & Martell, 2001; see also chapter 14 of this volume) EPPM provides a mechanism for understanding how people respond to risk messages. In EPPM, fear can motivate people to action. For fear to motivate, a threat needs to be relevant to people and perceived as significant. For people living near a facility with hazardous materials, the threat can be perceived as relevant and significant. If people believe a threat is real, they then make assessments of efficacy. For people to follow the advice given in a risk message, they must believe that the proposed action will work (response efficacy) and that they can enact the proposed action (self-efficacy). If people do not believe the response will work and/or do not think they can execute the response, they ignore the risk and messages associated with it (Witte et al., 2001). Exercises help community members understand that the organization's emergency plan can work. Moreover, if community members participate in the exercise they can learn that they can enact the actions

required in the emergency plan—they can take the steps necessary to evacuate or to shelter-in-place. Crisis managers would be wise to assess efficacy efforts before and after full-scale exercises. This would provide important insights into how the community is reacting to crisis preparation.

An important element in a CMP is the assessment of crisis vulnerability (CV). A crisis team should identify and rate all possible risks that could become crises for the organization, what is termed crisis vulnerability. Each possible risk should be rated on likelihood (L) and impact (I). Likelihood represents the odds a risk will manifest into a crisis will happen and impact is how severely the resulting crisis will affect the organization. Typically a crisis team rates both likelihood and impact on a scale of 1 to 10 with 10 being the highest score. A common formula for evaluating crisis vulnerability is $L \times I = CV$ (Coombs, 2006a). Based on the crisis vulnerability, the crisis team can begin to assemble the supporting materials for the CMP.

Ideally, a CMP is kept brief. Bigger does not mean better with CMPs. Crisis teams should construct a database of supporting materials that is related to the CMP. Call it a crisis appendix. The crisis appendix is a collection of information you anticipate needing during a crisis. For instance, it includes information you will need such as safety/accident records, lists of chemical at a facility, any past recalls, training related to the crisis event, and government inspections. The crisis appendix will be vast so it should be kept in electronic form with backup copies included with other critical data the organization has stored in an off-site storage facility as well as in hard copy format. Part of the crisis plan includes procedures for accessing the crisis appendix.

As with prevention, the role of communication in preparation has been underdeveloped. Applications of ideas from risk communication have a strong potential for expanding our knowledge of crisis communication in the preparation phase.

CRISIS RESPONSE

When a crisis hits, an organization is in the crisis response phase. Management focuses on handling the crisis situation and attempting to return the organization to normal operations. A crisis demands action so an organization should respond in some way. The bulk of the crisis communication writings involve the crisis response: what is said and done after a crisis (Seeger, Sellnow, & Ulmer, 1998, 2001). To be more precise, we can label this *crisis response communication*. Both practitioners and researchers have been fascinated with crisis response communication. This has led to a robust but disjointed literature. Many people representing many different perspectives have written on the subject. I will impose an order on crisis response communication by categorizing the research. The first categories divide crisis response communication into form and content. Form refers to *how* an organization should respond while content refers to *what* an organization says and does.

Form

The first writings on crisis response communication focused on form. Form centers on how an organization should present the response and the general nature of the response. The form recommendations for crisis response communication rely heavily upon early practitioner ideas. This conventional wisdom has been proven to be useful over the years. The four key features of form are: (1) be quick, (2) avoid “no comment,” (3) be accurate, and (4) be consistent (speak with one voice).

Being quick means the organization must get its message out fast. Writers frequently mention the “golden hour” meaning an organization should respond in 60 minutes or less. The need for speed has been intensified by the use of the Internet. A crisis creates a knowledge vacuum. Stakeholders need to know what has and is happening with the crisis. The news media needs sources. If the organization does not speak quickly enough with the news media, the media moves on to other sources. If the organization does not tell its story, some one else will tell the story of the crisis. This “other” story

can be inaccurate and/or framed such that it makes the organization look bad. Silence is a passive response that allows others to control the discussion of the crisis. An organization must take charge and articulate what has happened and the steps they are taking to address the crisis.

The Internet and the 24-hour news cycle have intensified the need for a quick response. The news media can post stories any time of the day or night. Observers of the crisis and critics of the organization can do the same with comments they post to blogs. Crisis teams are wise to integrate the Internet into their crisis response. A crisis section can be added to a web site or a separate crisis web site created before a crisis. The crisis web site is simply a “dark site,” one that is not active. Once a crisis hits, the dark site is customized to the actual crisis and activated. The crisis team can then post real-time updates if need be (Caikin & Dietz, 2002; Holtz, 1999).

Related to being quick to respond is avoiding the “no comment” response. A spokesperson may have to face the news media or other stakeholders before much is known about the crisis. If you do not know an answer to a question, say that you do not have the information and promise to answer the question when you get the relevant information. Research has shown that when a spokesperson says “no comment” the stakeholders hear “I am guilty and trying to hide something” (Kempner, 1995).

It stands to reason that an organization must provide accurate information to stakeholders about the crisis. The problem is that speed and accuracy are not always a good fit. Errors can be made in the rush to deliver information. The very tragic Sago coal mine disaster was a harsh reminder of misinformation during a crisis. In January of 2006, 13 men were trapped in the International Coal Group’s mine in Sago, West Virginia. Late on January 3, relatives were told that 11 or 12 men had survived resulting in a massive celebration. Three hours later, friends and families were told by an official spokesperson that only one man had survived. People were told the miners were alive when in fact all but one had perished. This “miscommunication” added to the tragedy and pain. The initial message was that rescuers had found 12 men and were checking them for vital signs. Somehow the message became jumbled and was not delivered through official channels. Accuracy is important and it is worth waiting to insure the message is correct.

The emphasis on consistency means the crisis response messages emanating from the organization must not contradict one another. Originally this was known as “speaking with one voice.” However, speaking with one voice has two problematic connotations. First, people assume that only one person should speak for an organization. This is an unrealistic expectation. Crises can extend for days making it impractical, if not impossible, for only one person to speak for the organization.

The news media wants to receive information from experts. Hence, the spokespersons are more likely to be employees, such as engineers, with technical expertise than the public relations staff. When I have conducted crisis media training for corporations, I have worked with the technical people. This is not a denigration of the public relations staff. It is simply a realization that a technical expert can answer the types of questions that will be asked about the crisis. As much as you brief a public relations person on the production process, the person who runs that process will know more and provide greater detail. Which is more valuable to have in front of the news media? Because different types of expertise, such as safety or production, may be needed to explain the crisis, multiple voices are demanded.

Finally, it is unrealistic to expect no one outside of the crisis team will talk to the media or other stakeholders. You actually do want employees explaining the crisis to stakeholders they know. As Ketchum, a major public relations firm, notes, employees provide a very credible source for friends, neighbors, and customers (Handsman, 2004). Second, speaking with one voice does not require all employees to spout the “organizational line.” Instead, the idea is that all who speak for the organization have the same knowledge from which to draw. The same knowledge will help to create consistent messages. All employees should be kept well informed so they can be a source of accurate crisis-related knowledge for stakeholders. One way to keep employees informed is through computerized phone notification systems. The Internet and organizational Intranet provide additional channels for keeping employees up-to-date on the crisis.

Content

Content delves more deeply into the nature of the response. The focus shifts to the specifics of what the crisis message should communicate. Content has a strategic focus and relates to the goals of crisis response communication. The central goals of crisis response communication reflect those of crisis management: (1) preventing or minimizing damage, (2) maintaining the organization's operations (business continuity), and (3) reputation repair. Damage can include harm to people, reputation, finance, or the environment. The number one priority in damage control is protecting people. Business continuity directly relates to financial harm. Efforts to maintain business operations are known as business continuity. Organizations must return to regular operations as soon as possible after a crisis. The longer a crisis interrupts operations, the more the financial loss for the organization. A crisis also threatens to damage an organization's reputation (Barton, 2001; Dilenschneider, 2000). A reputation is a valued intangible resource that should be monitored and protected (Davies, Chun, de Silva, & Roper, 2003).

Sturges (1994) developed an excellent system for organizing crisis response communication. The post-crisis strategies are divided into three functions: (1) instructing information, (2) adjusting information, and (3) reputation repair. The majority of crisis response communication research examines reputation repair. However, it is important to understand the relevance of instructing and adjusting information to provide a complete picture of crisis response communication.

Instructing Information

Instructing information uses strategies that seek to tell stakeholders what to do to protect themselves from the crisis. Protection can involve physical and/or financial harm. Customers and community stakeholders can be at physical risk. Defective or tampered products can hurt customers. As a result, organizations must warn customers of any dangers. The warning typically involves supplying the necessary recall information such as the product's name, description, and, if relevant, the batch number.

An example of instructing information would be the 2006 recall of dog food by Diamond Pet Food. Some of their dog food products had been contaminated with corn aflatoxin, a corn fungus that is harmful to dogs. Not all products were affected and not all of the products in the recall were a threat, only those in a particular batch. Diamond Pet Food's recall information included the list of states where the product had been sold, the names of its specific brands covered in the recall, the "Best By Date" that identifies the contaminated batch, and symptoms of illness if dogs had consumed the contaminated food (Diamond, 2006). The Federal government has specific requirements for recalls. Table 5.1 lists the main aspects of governmental requirements for information to be given to consumers during recalls.

Threats to the community are another form of instructing information. Accidents that can release hazardous materials threaten the nearby members of the community. Community members must be warned to either evacuate the area or to shelter-in-place. From 1995 to 1999, over 200,000 people were involved in chemical releases that required either evacuation or the need to shelter-in-place. No fatalities to community members occurred (Kleindorfer et al., 2000). The evacuation and shelter-in-place statistics reinforce the need for and value of instructing information.

Instructing information returns us to the Extended Parallel Process Model. Stakeholders at risk must believe there is a threat and that the prescribed actions will protect them from this threat. It is not as simple as disseminating information. Stakeholders must act upon the information in the desired fashion—they must protect themselves. If stakeholders do not act upon the instructing information, the damage will not be prevented or limited.

Crises can threaten to disrupt supply chains. A supply chain follows a product from raw materials to finished goods. Various organizations can be linked by the creation of a product. For instance,

TABLE 5.1
Food and Drug Administration Recall Guidelines for Instructions to Consumers

Product Identification

Include an accurate and complete description of the product and any codes used to identify the product, e.g., lot/unit numbers, expiration dates, serial numbers, catalog numbers, model numbers, and UPC codes.

Consider including a copy of the product label with the recall notification. This could be helpful for wholesalers and retailers in identifying and removing the recalled product.

Your Instructions should be clear. For example:

- Remove product from sale
- Cease distribution
- Subrecall (if appropriate)
- Return Product
- Explain procedures for product correction

Include a RETURN REPSONE card/form. This return response card/form should include all instructions for your from your recall letter. Your customers should be required to indicate that they followed every instruction (Product, n.d.).

producers of apple juice and manufacturers of mobile phones need specialized computer chips. A break in one of these links is problematic for the other members of the chain, especially those immediately tied to the “broken” link for an organization. Suppliers and customers represent the adjacent links. Suppliers and customers require information about business continuity.

The key piece of business continuity information is whether or not the company will maintain production and the level of that production. If production is stopped for a time or continues in a diminished capacity, suppliers and customers must adjust their behavior. If production will be stopped, suppliers and customers need estimates for when it will resume. Suppliers will not send shipments or will send smaller amounts. Customers must find alternative suppliers for key resources or reduce their production. One option for maintaining business operation is to use a hot site. Another is to increase production at a similar facility. A *hot site* is a temporary facility a business can use to provide the same level of products or services. Suppliers need to know if the hot site or another facility is being used to adjust production levels because they must deliver materials to a different address. Suppliers need to know where the hot site is (they should know where your other existing facility is) and how long the alternate arrangements will be in use.

Employees also need to know how the crisis affects their work. Employees must be informed if they will be working and where they will be working. In some cases a hot site or other facility will be a substantial distance away. The organization will have to arrange transportation and perhaps housing for employees. The exact details must be communicated to employees in a timely manner so they can adjust their lives to this shift. If employees are not working, they need to know how the disruption will affect their pay and benefits.

Very little research exists that explores ways to improve the development and delivery of instructing information. As noted in this section, risk communication research can inform instructing information. Crisis communication would benefit from research that addresses specific instructing information concerns. One of those concerns is compliance with recalls. We know that many consumers ignore product recalls. This places them in danger from product harm. What can be done to improve recalls? Are there better communication channels for delivering the message or ways to structure the message to increase compliance?

Adjusting Information

Adjusting information helps stakeholders cope psychologically with the effects of a crisis. The uncertainty surrounding a crisis produces stress for stakeholders. To cope with this psychological

stress, stakeholders need to know about what happened and what the organization is doing to address the crisis. Crisis managers should provide a summary of the event and outline of what actions are being taken. Furthermore, stakeholders want to know what is being done to protect them from similar crises in the future—what corrective actions are being taken. Corrective actions reassure stakeholders that they are safe thereby reducing their psychological stress (Sellnow, Ulmer, & Snider, 1998). An organization cannot always be quick in providing corrective action. It often takes weeks or months to discover the cause of many crises (e.g., Ray, 1999). Crisis managers cannot discuss corrective action until the cause of the crisis is known. Crisis managers are warned not to speculate; if the speculation is wrong, the crisis manager looks either incompetent or deceptive. Neither perception is desirable. Talking about corrective action prior to understanding the cause is a form of speculation.

Stakeholders can become victims of the crisis. There are expectations that the organization will acknowledge the victims in some way, typically with an expression of concern (Patel & Reinsch, 2003). The recommendation to express sympathy or concern for victims is born out of the need for adjusting information. Research generally supports using expressions of concern. The legal danger with expressing concern is that it can be construed as accepting responsibility. The feeling is that an expression of sympathy is an indication of accepting responsibility. A number of states now have laws that prevent statements of sympathy from being used as evidence of accepting responsibility in lawsuits (Cohen, 1999; Fuchs-Burnett, 2002).

Reputation Repair

Reputation repair is a study in the use of crisis communication designed to protect an organization's reputation/image/character during a crisis (Seeger, Sellnow, & Ulmer, 2001). The researchers attempt to construct recommendations, offering advice for when crisis managers should utilize particular crisis response strategies (Hearit, 2001). The crisis response strategies are the discourse and actions used to rebuild/repair the organizational reputation.

Value of Reputations. Not that many years ago people were debating the value of “reputation.” Reputation is an evaluation of the organization. Thus we can talk of unfavorable and favorable reputations. It refers to how stakeholders perceive the organization (Davies et al., 2003). Reputations are now recognized as a valuable, intangible asset. Reputational assets yield such significant outcomes as attracting customers, generating investment interest, attracting top employee talent, motivating workers, increasing job satisfaction, generating more positive media coverage, and garnering positive comments from financial analysts (Alsop, 2004; Davies et al., 2003; Bowling, 2002; Fombrun & van Riel, 2003). A reputation is built through the organization-stakeholder relationship (Fombrun & van Riel, 2003). Favorable reputations are created through positive interactions while unfavorable reputations are built through negative interactions. Crises present a threat to an organization's reputation and crisis response strategies provide a mechanism for protecting this vital organizational resource.

Corporate Apologia. One of the initial research lines in crisis response communication was corporate apologia. Apologia or self-defense is a concept derived from genre theory in rhetoric. The focus of apologia is on defending one's character following accusations of wrongdoing (Hearit, 2006; see also chapter 27 of this volume). People respond to attacks on character using one of four strategies: denial, bolstering, differentiation, and transcendence. The denial strategy claims there is no wrongdoing or the person is uninvolved in the wrongdoing. Bolstering connects the individual to something the audience would view positively. Differentiation attempts to take the action out of its current, negative context. The idea is that it is the negative context, not the act that creates unfavorable audience reactions. Transcendence attempts to place the action in a new, broader context to make the action seem more favorable (Hobbs, 1995; Ice, 1991).

Dionisopolous and Vibbert (1988) were among the first to argue it was appropriate to examine corporate apologia, self-defense rhetoric created by organizations. The premise was that organizations have a public persona (a reputation) that may be attacked and in need of defense. In other words, organizations can experience and respond to character attacks. Dionisopolous and Vibbert (1988) outlined the parameters of corporate apologia without specific application to crisis management.

Keith Hearit (1994, 1995a, 1995b, 2001, 2006; see also chapter 27 of this volume) developed corporate apologia into a distinct line of research. Corporate apologia is a response to criticism that “seeks to present a compelling, competing account of organizational actions” (Hearit, 2001 p. 502). He developed a vocabulary and unique perspective for integrating corporate apologia into crisis communication. The cornerstone of the perspective is social legitimacy, the consistency between organizational values and stakeholder values. A crisis threatens social legitimacy by making an organization appear incompetent (e.g., a hazardous chemical release) and/or violating stakeholder expectations (e.g., unfair labor practices). Hearit (1994, 1995a) posits that the social legitimacy violation is a form of character attack that calls forth apologia. Hearit (1996, 2001) extended corporate apologia beyond the four rhetorical strategies by addressing the concept of dissociation.

Dissociations involve splitting a single idea into two parts. Through dissociation the organization tries to reduce the threat a crisis poses to its reputation. Hearit (1995b, 2006) identifies three dissociations that are pertinent to reputation management: (1) opinion/knowledge, (2) individual/group, and (3) act/essence. Opinion/knowledge is used to deny a crisis exists. The crisis manager asserts that the claims of a crisis or the organization’s involvement in the crisis are just opinion and do not match the facts of the situation. If people look at the facts, they will see there is no crisis or no connection to the organization. If the organization is not involved in a crisis, there can be no damage from the crisis. The individual/group dissociation tries to deflect some responsibility from the organization by blaming only a part of the organization for the crisis. Some person or group of persons were responsible for the crisis, not the entire organization. The crisis was a result of a few bad apples. The organization will then punish those responsible. Overall, the organization has acted responsibly and should not be punished by stakeholders. Finally, the act/essence dissociation accepts responsibility for the crisis but claims the crisis does not represent the “real” organization. The crisis was an anomaly and is not a true reflection of the organization. The organization should be forgiven for this lapse if stakeholders believe the organization is truly good (Hearit, 1996; Ilgen, 2002).

Impression Management. Legitimacy, whether or not an organization conforms to the social rules held by its stakeholders, drives the impression management line of crisis response communication research. A crisis threatens legitimacy by violating the social rules, hence, crisis response strategies are used to rebuild legitimacy. The ideas strongly parallel those in corporate apologia but employ different terminology. Airplanes should not crash and dangerous chemicals should not be released into the environment. Only a small number of studies can be classified as reflecting impression management but the research expanded the number of crisis response strategies beyond those in corporate apologia by drawing strategies from the impression management literature. A set of seven strategies was identified: excuse, avoiding responsibility; justification, accept responsibility for the act but not the consequence of the act; ingratiation, try to build stakeholder support or approval; intimidation, threat of action against a person or group; apology, accept responsibility and accept punishment; denouncement, claim some other party is responsible; and factual distortion, information about the event is untrue or distorted in some fashion (Allen & Caillouet, 1994; Caillouet & Allen, 1996; Massey, 2001). Table 5.2 provides a complete list and definition of the various crisis response strategies.

Image Restoration Theory. Benoit (1995) has developed the widely cited theory of image restoration strategies employed in crisis communication research. Two key assumptions provide the foundation for Benoit’s theory of image restoration strategies. First, corporate communication is conceptualized

TABLE 5.2
Allen and Caillouet's (1994) Impression Management Strategies

Excuse: Try to lessen responsibility for the event
Denial of Intention: negative effects were accidental or unforeseeable
Denial of Volition: could not control the trigger event
Denial of Agency: organization did not perform the act leading to the crisis
Justification: try to show the negative consequence were not that bad
Denial of Injury: no one was hurt so crisis was trivial
Denial of Victim: the victim deserved the injuries
Condemnation of Condemner: crisis was unimportant because others have had ones that are worse.
Negative Events Misrepresented: things are not as bad as they seem
Ingratiation: try to gain approval of stakeholders
Self-enhancing Communication: try to persuade stakeholders that organization has positive qualities.
Role Model: the organization should serve as an example for others
Social Responsibility: organization claims to accept social responsibility
Other-enhancing Communication: praise stakeholders to win their approval
Opinion Conformity: organization expresses values and beliefs similar to stakeholders
Intimidation: try to convey that the organization is potent and dangerous, may include threats.
Apology: organization admits responsibility and requests punishment
Denouncement: try to blame some external agent for the crisis
Factual Distortion: try to establish that information about the crisis was taken out of context or is incorrect

as a goal-directed activity. Second, maintaining a positive reputation for the organization is one of the central goals of this communication. According to Benoit, "communication is best conceptualized as an instrumental activity" (Benoit, 1995, p. 67). Benoit claims, "Communicative acts are intended to attain goals important to the communicators who perform them. These utterances are ones that the communicators believe will help accomplish (with reasonable cost) goals that are salient to the actor at the time they are made" (Benoit, 1995, p. 67).

While not designed specifically for crisis management, Benoit and others have applied image restoration theory to a wide variety of crisis cases including airlines (Benoit & Czerwinski, 1997), entertainment (Benoit, 1997), and the chemical industry (Brinson & Benoit, 1999). Image restoration identified five basic crisis response strategies: denial, claim the actor (organization) is not involved in the crisis; evading responsibility, eliminate or reduce personal (organizational) responsibility for the crisis; reducing offensiveness by making the event (crisis) seem less negative; corrective action, restore the situation to pre-event (pre-crisis) conditions and/or promise to take action to prevent a repeat of the event (crisis); and mortification, accept responsibility for the act (crisis) and ask for forgiveness. Table 5.3 provides a complete list and definition of the image restoration strategies.

The primary recommendation emerging from image restoration theory is for crisis managers to use mortification. It is presumed that publicly accepting responsibility for an act is the one, best way to respond to a crisis (Brinson & Benoit, 1999; Tyler, 1997).

Situational Crisis Communication Theory

As with the other crisis response communication research reviewed thus far, Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) identifies crisis response strategies. SCCT organizes previously

TABLE 5.3
Benoit's (1995) Image Restoration Strategies

1. Denial	Simple Denial: there is no crisis
	Shift the Blame: so other agent is responsible for the crisis, not the organization
2. Evading Responsibility	Provocation: crisis was a result of response to someone else's actions
	Defeasibility: lack of information about events leading to the crisis situation
	Accidental: lack of control over events leading to the crisis situation
	Good intentions: organization meant to do well
3. Reducing Offensiveness	Bolstering: remind stakeholders of the organization's positive qualities
	Minimize: try to reduce the perceived offensiveness of crisis by saying it was minor
	Differentiation: try to reduce offensiveness of crisis by comparing act to similar, more serious ones
	Transcendence: place act in a different, more favorable context
	Attack Accuser: attack those who claim a crisis exists
	Compensation: organization offers money or goods to victims
4. Corrective Action:	organization tries to restore the situation to pre-act status and/or promise change and prevent a repeat of the act
5. Mortification:	organization admits responsibility, asks for forgiveness, and expresses regret

delineated crisis response strategies using Attribution theory as a guiding light. SCCT presumes stakeholders will make attributions about the cause of a crisis. Crises vary in terms of whether the stakeholders attribute the cause of the crisis to the organization or external factors. The stronger the attributions of organizational control for the crisis (crisis responsibility), the greater the reputational threat posed by a crisis (Coombs, 1995; Coombs & Holladay, 2002). SCCT holds that crisis managers can use crisis discourse to (1) alter attributions about the crisis, (2) change perceptions of the organization in crisis, or (3) a combination of the two. It was from this attributional perspective that a synthesized list of crisis response strategies was developed (Coombs, 1999a). As Benoit (1995) observed, how strategies are arranged and grouped is a matter of choice. Different organizational schema result in different lists of crisis response strategies.

SCCT organized crisis response strategies based on whether they were used to either alter perceptions of the crisis or the organization in crisis. Four postures or groups of similar crisis response strategies were identified: (1) deny; (2) diminish; (3) rebuild; and (4) bolstering. Deny involves removing any connection between the organization and the crisis. If the organization is not involved, it will suffer no damage from the event. Diminish is connected with reducing the attributions of organizational control for the crisis or the negative impact of the crisis. If crisis managers can lessen the organization's connection to the crisis and/or have people view the crisis less negatively, the harmful effects of the crisis are reduced. Rebuild represents direct efforts to improve the organization's reputation. The crisis managers say and do things to benefit stakeholders and thereby take positive actions to offset the crisis. Finally, bolstering is a supplemental strategy to the other three. Organizations who have had positive relationships with stakeholders can draw upon that goodwill to help protect the organizational reputation or praise stakeholders as a means of improving relationships with them. Table 5.4 provides the lists and definitions of crisis response strategies in each posture.

While SCCT does offer a list of post-crisis response strategies, it diverges sharply from the other reputation repair research in communication. SCCT is developing a theory-based and empirically tested approach to reputation repair. The theory is predictive, rather than descriptive. SCCT does not use the case study method employed by corporate apologia, impression management, and image restoration. Instead, experimental and quasi-experimental designs are used to test the relationships identified in the theory and the guidelines it recommends. The methods are consistent with the roots of SCCT in Attribution theory. The focus of SCCT is on finding the post-crisis response strategy that best fits with the given crisis situation.

TABLE 5.4
SCCT Crisis Response Strategies by Posture

Deny Posture

Attack the accuser: crisis manager confronts the person or group claiming something is wrong with the organization.

“The organization threatened to sue the people who claim a crisis occurred.”

Denial: crisis manager asserts that there is no crisis.

“The organization said that no crisis event occurred.”

Shoehorn: crisis manager blames some person or group outside of the organization for the crisis.

“The organization blamed the supplier for the crisis.”

Diminish Posture

Excuse: crisis manager minimizes organizational responsibility by denying intent to do harm and/or claiming inability to control the events that triggered the crisis.

“The organization said it did not intend for the crisis to occur and that accidents happen as part of the operation of any organization.”

Justification: crisis manager minimizes the perceived damage caused by the crisis.

“The organization said the damage and injuries from the crisis were very minor.”

Rebuild Posture

Compensation: crisis manager offers money or other gifts to victims.

“The organization offered money and products as compensation.”

Apology: crisis manager indicates the organization takes full responsibility for the crisis and asks stakeholders for forgiveness.

“The organization publicly accepted full responsibility for the crisis and asked stakeholders to forgive the mistake.”

Bolstering Posture

Reminder: tell stakeholders about the past good works of the organization.

“The organization restated its recent work to improve K-12 education.”

Ingratiation: crisis manager praises stakeholders and/or reminds them of past good works by the organization.

“The organization thanked stakeholders for their help and reminded stakeholders of the organization’s past effort to help the community and to improve the environment.”

Attribution theory serves as the basis in SCCT for determining which crisis response strategies are appropriate for a given crisis situation. Variables from Attribution theory were adapted to the evaluation of crisis situations. Attribution theory holds that people will assign responsibility for negative, unexpected events (Weiner, 1986). Crises fit perfectly into Attribution theory. Even with limited information, stakeholders will determine the degree to which an organization is responsible for a crisis. There is a growing body of research applying Attribution theory to crises in marketing as well as in communication (Ahluwalia, Burnkrant, & Unnava, 2000; Bradford & Garrett, 1995; Dawar & Pillutla, 2000; Dean, 2004; Folkes, Koletsky, & Graham, 1987; Hartel, McColl-Kennedy, & McDonald, 1998). Attribution theory provides a framework for understanding the potential reputational threat posed by a crisis situation.

SCCT utilizes three factors to assess the reputational threat of a crisis: crisis type (frame), crisis history, and prior reputation. Crisis type is the frame used to define the crisis. The literature has identified a set of three crisis types/frames for categorizing crises: (1) victim, (2) accidental, and (3) intentional. Each crisis type/frame has been found to generate predictable amounts of crisis responsibility (Coombs & Holladay, 2002). Table 5.5 identifies the crisis types used in SCCT and level of crisis responsibility associated with each one. Crisis responsibility is a threat to the reputation. The greater the attributions of crisis responsibility, the greater the damage a crisis can inflict on a reputation (Coombs, 2004b; Coombs & Holladay, 1996, 2004). The crisis type/frame provides the initial reputational threat.

Crisis history and prior reputation serve to modify the initial reputational threat. Organizations that have suffered previous crises will find the reputational threat of the current crisis stronger than if they had not had crises (Coombs, 2004a; Coombs & Holladay, 2001, 2004). A history of crises means stakeholders will treat a victim crisis like an accidental crisis and an accidental crisis like an

TABLE 5.5
Crisis Types and Level of Crisis Responsibility

Victim Crises: Minimal Crisis Responsibility

Natural disasters: acts of nature such as tornadoes or earthquakes.
 Rumors: false and damaging information being circulated about your organization.
 Workplace violence: attack by former or current employee on current employees on-site.
 Product Tampering/Malevolence: external agent causes damage to the organization.

Accident Crises: Low Crisis Responsibility

Challenges: stakeholder claims that the organization is operating in an inappropriate manner.
 Technical error accidents: equipment or technology failure that cause an industrial accident.
 Technical error product harm: equipment or technology failure that cause a product to be defective or potentially harmful.

Preventable Crises: Strong Crisis Responsibility

Human-error accidents: industrial accident caused by human error.
 Human-error product harm: product is defective or potentially harmful because of human error.
 Organizational misdeed: management actions that put stakeholders at risk and/or violate the law.

intentional crisis (Coombs, 2004a, 2004b). Research on prior reputation has found limited support for the belief that a favorable prior reputation is a halo that protects a reputation during a crisis. Instead, the results strongly indicate that an unfavorable prior reputation makes a crisis more difficult to manage by intensifying the reputational threat. As with crisis history, an unfavorable prior reputation means stakeholders will treat a victim crisis like an accidental crisis and an accidental crisis like an intentional crisis (Coombs, 2006a; Coombs & Holladay, 2002). However, there is little support to demonstrate a favorable prior reputation creates a meaningful halo effect (Coombs & Holladay, 2002; Klein & Dawar, 2004).

Based on the assessment of crisis type/frame, crisis history, and prior reputation, SCCT has generated a list of recommendations for selecting crisis response strategies. The key to protecting the organizational reputation is to select the appropriate crisis response strategy(ies). SCCT argues that as the reputational threat increases, crisis managers must use more accommodative strategies. Accommodation refers to the degree to which the response centers on the victim and takes responsibility for the crisis (Coombs & Holladay, 2004). Rebuild strategies are the most accommodative followed by diminish. Deny strategies are the least accommodative of all (Coombs, 2006b; Marcus & Goodman, 1991). Table 5.6 summarizes the recommendations offered by SCCT.

TABLE 5.6
Crisis Response Recommendations for Situational Crisis Communication Theory

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1. All victims or potential victims should receive instructing information.
 2. All victims should be provided adjusting information including an expression of sympathy.
 3. For crises with minimal attributions of crisis responsibility and no history of crises or a negative prior reputation, instructing and adjusting information is sufficient.
 4. For crises with minimal attributions of crisis responsibility and a history of crises or a negative prior reputation, add diminish strategies to the instructing and adjusting information.
 5. For crises with weak attributions of crisis responsibility, and no history of crises or a negative prior reputation, add diminish strategies to the instructing and adjusting information.
 6. For crises with weak attributions of crisis responsibility and a history of crises or a negative prior reputation, add rebuild strategies to the instructing and adjusting information.
 7. For crises with strong attributions of crisis responsibility and a history of crises or a negative prior reputation, add rebuild strategies to the instructing and adjusting information.
 8. Reinforcing strategies can be used to supplement any response.
- Deny response strategies are best used only for rumor and challenge crises.
9. Attempt to maintain consistency between post-crisis response strategies by not mixing deny strategies with either rebuild or diminish strategies.
-

More recently, SCCT has expanded beyond reputation repair to consider the effects of the crisis situation on stakeholder emotion. Of particular interest is the amount of anger generated by a crisis. Anger follows a pattern similar to attributions of crisis responsibility; as crisis responsibility intensifies so too does anger. Anger is important because it can facilitate a negative communication dynamic. Anger will dissipate over time. However, angry stakeholders are more likely to engage in negative word-of-mouth—say bad things about a business or its products (Coombs & Holladay, 2005). Negative word-of-mouth has been shown to reduce purchase intentions, a consequence most organizations would like to avoid (Brown & Reingen, 1987; Herr, Kardes, & Kim, 1991; Laczniak, DeCarlo, & Ramaswami, 2001). By incorporating emotion into SCCT, research may determine ways to reduce the anger generated by a crisis and prevent the negative communication dynamic from developing.

SCCT acknowledges that crisis response strategies are discretionary; crisis managers can choose which, if any, to use in a crisis situation. Financial factors, for example, can pose a constraint for crisis managers. Crisis response strategies become more expensive as they become more accommodative. Apology is a perfect illustration. Apology is a very expensive strategy because it opens the door to payments on lawsuits initiated by victims (Tyler, 1997). Crisis managers may opt not to use apology because of the price tag. SCCT indicates the possible effectiveness of the various crisis response strategies. As a result, crisis managers can decide what the next most viable strategy might be if the recommended strategy is not used.

Summary

Reputation repair is a valuable aspect of crisis response communication. Organizations spend a great deal of time, effort, and money on building a favorable reputation. It is imperative to understand how the words and actions of the organization impact the way stakeholders react to the crisis and how the crisis may alter its reputation. We can never diminish the critical role of instructing and adjusting information. Crisis managers should never attempt to repair a reputation until instructing and adjusting information is provided. Moreover, the instructing and adjusting information can be enough to protect a reputation when crises present a minor reputational threat.

We know more about crisis response communication than any other aspect of crisis communication but there is still much more to explore. The lack of theory-driven research and the emphasis on case studies derived from second-hand sources has limited the development of reputation repair work. Case studies based on media accounts lack the depth and insight provided by cases that collect information from those involved in the crisis management process. Rob Ulmer's (2001) analysis of Mulden Mills is an example of the benefits from studies that tap into first-hand experiences. His article is a rare and insightful insider view of a crisis case. Ulmer's work has evolved into the rhetoric of renewal and this research retains the focus on insider information and insights (Ulmer & Sellnow, 2002; Ulmer, Selnow, & Seeger, 2006). Another problem with second-hand case studies is that the prescriptive advice is really speculation if untested. This is dangerous if the speculation is incorrect. Coombs and Schmidt (2000), for instance, tested "conclusions" from one image restoration case study and found them to be incorrect. In sum, much of the existing reputation repair research has generated more speculation about what should be done rather than testing of actual prescriptive claims. A shift to more theory building and testing and less reliance on case studies will create a more fruitful area of post-crisis communication research.

POST-CRISIS

The transition from crisis response to the post-crisis phase is not always distinct. In the post-crisis phase, the organization is returning to operations as normal and the crisis is now a lower priority. However, there will still be lingering crisis communication concerns and a need to learn from the crisis.

Even when a crisis is “over,” people are back to work or the product has been recalled, there are still communication concerns. The post-crisis communication concerns reflect the need for follow-up communication to stakeholders. Follow-up communication includes updates on progress to recover from the crisis, actions taken to prevent a repeat of the crisis, delivery of information promised to stakeholders during the crisis, release of reports about the investigation of the crisis, and providing information to any governmental agencies that are investigating the crisis.

Suppliers, customers, employees, and investors want to know how the recovery is progressing. Suppliers and customers want to know exactly when the supply chain will be fully restored. For suppliers, this includes any changes in shipping addresses as a damaged facility returns to operations. Investors want some idea of how long the crisis might affect their earnings while employees will want to know there are any lingering effects on their jobs. Victims of the crisis want to know the steps the organization has taken to prevent a repeat of the crisis. During a crisis, management may not have certain requested information and promise to provide that information once it is known. The organization builds credibility by delivering all of the promised information.

All crises will involve some investigation of the cause. The investigations will vary in the degree of formality and the parties involved. These investigations can be conducted by government agencies and/or the organization itself. The organization must cooperate by supplying the necessary information to governmental investigations. For very high profile crises, an organization will want to release the findings of its own report. Examples include E.F.Hutton and its check kiting scandal in the 1980s, Mitsubishi and its sexual harassment epidemic in the 1990s, and BP and its Texas City explosion in 2005. Organizational reports often include the corrective actions thereby addressing the prevention concerns of victims. Follow-up communication must be accomplished in a timely manner and be clear to the target audience. It is often a challenge to translate technical information from an investigation into clear information for stakeholders. Communication clarity is a serious challenge for follow-up communication. Research has largely ignored the problems of clearly presenting the technical aspects of follow-up communication to stakeholders.

The final component in crisis management is learning. The discussion of exercises touched briefly on learning. Crisis managers dissect exercises and actual crises to determine what worked and what needs improvement. This dissection is known as a post-mortem. The idea of a crisis post-mortem is to improve the crisis management process. Communication is a critical part of the process. As a result, a key component of a post-mortem is the assessment of various aspects of crisis communication. This is as simple as determining if the contact information is useful in the CMP and as complex as determining the effectiveness of disseminating the various crisis messages to the many stakeholders involved in the crisis management effort.

Learning informs the other phases. A crisis can reveal a risk or threat that had not been high on the organization’s list or even on its crisis radar. Like an exercise, a crisis can reveal flaws in a CMP or identify weak crisis team members. A CMP may need to be refined or a crisis team member replaced. Changes in preparation should translate into more effective responses when a crisis hits.

If we dig deeper into the communicative aspect of learning, a danger appears. A post-mortem involves collecting information from people involved in the crisis management effort. If the crisis management effort went poorly, a barrier arises. People can view a post-mortem as a search for blame. As a result, people may withhold important pieces of negative information. In general, people do not like to disclose bad news in an organization, especially if it reflects negatively upon them. The challenge is to create a climate where people know the purpose is improving the crisis response and not trying to pin blame on anyone. Advice on how to specially address such a challenge is beyond the scope of this chapter. However, it is important to recognize that learning from a crisis does have communicative challenges.

CONCLUSION

Crisis communication is much more complex and diverse than the extant literature would suggest. The limited research focus has constrained what we could know about crisis communication. Crisis communication is integral to the pre-crisis, crisis response, and post-crisis stages and can provide value throughout the crisis management process. At every stage communication is the lifeblood that fills the knowledge demands created by a crisis—allows people to make sense of the crisis. Communication enables the collection, analysis, and dissemination of crisis-related knowledge and provides the foundation for decision making.

Research that centers on crisis knowledge management is scant. One reason for this neglect is the assumption that information is easy to collect, analyze, and disseminate. We know the process is not easy and is fraught with potential problems. There are a variety of principles and theories in organizational communication and management that could be applied to the study of crisis knowledge management to illuminate those potential problems. As a result, crisis knowledge management offers great research potential that should be tapped.

Thus far, the vast majority of crisis communication research has centered on stakeholder reaction management through crisis response studies oriented toward reputation repair. This results in a rather narrow knowledge base. What we do not know and still need to know is vast. Instructing and adjusting information have a critical role in the crisis response but have received little attention (e.g., Sturges, 1994; Coombs, 1999a). Even the highly researched reputation repair topic is limited by an emphasis on descriptive case studies built from news media reports and other second-hand accounts. There is room for growth even in the best-understood aspect of crisis communication through the application of first-hand reports about crises and the experimental study of factors that shape the crisis response.

Throughout this chapter I have tried to complicate our thinking about crisis communication. We must expand our scope beyond crisis responses and reputation repair. I do not mean we should abandon crisis communication as reputation repair; instead, we should integrate other topics to the mix. Crisis communication is a growing field whose potential remains far greater than its current yields. It is time to open new fields of study and sharpen our understanding of crisis communication. This book is an important step in that direction as it serves to integrate risk and crisis communication, a much needed step in the evolution of crisis communication.

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