

Teacher's Guide to Crisis Management

Lessons from the Arthur W. Page Center for Ethics and Integrity in Public Communication

Rationale and Overview

Crisis management is a response by an organization to a major, unpredictable event that threatens the organization, its stakeholders, or the public. A crisis usually brings negative media coverage of the organization. Once a crisis happens, news and information spread quickly. Thus, every organization should be thoroughly prepared for a crisis. These video materials are designed to help students explore diverse crisis situations and learn to effectively manage them.

Module Format

Students will watch video clips from public relations practitioners on crisis management and then answer a series of questions based on those clips. The remaining activities for this module involve reading three short articles and answering the questions provided. Under Module Activities is content you can use for grading or to aid with class discussion.

Learning Objectives

Through interviews with public relations practitioners, this module will show the ways in which a crisis happens and how to deal with that crisis. In particular, the activities in this lesson are designed to help students:

- Comprehend the meaning of crisis, crisis management, and crisis response;
- Identify what practitioners define as key “first steps” in managing a crisis;
- Understand the roles of the practitioner and the CEO in a crisis;
- Consider how new media technologies impact the way a crisis should be handled.

Key Concepts

The following concepts are integral to understanding crisis management. Before students watch the video clips, they will follow the [link](#) to the Institute for Public Relations (IPR) and read the

article titled, “Crisis Management and Communications” written by Coombs (2007). Based on the reading, define the concepts: crisis, crisis management, and crisis response.

Module Activity: Watch Video Clips

The following video clips include portions of interviews with public relations practitioners related to the issues of crisis management. These video clips are available at the website for the Arthur W. Page Center for Integrity in Public Communication. First, students will need to visit the [Center’s website](#), then go to [Oral History Collection](#). Then they need to click on the Ethics in Public Relations Finding Index [link](#). With this index, they can easily access material within and across interviews by topic, issue or specific question. Among the various topics, student should click on [Crisis Management](#), and then view the 14 video clips.

1. Charlotte Otto	6. Anne Barkedew	11. Jack Korten
2. Peter Debreceeny	7. Harold Burson	12. Marilyn Laurie
3. Jim Murphy	8. Ron Culp	13. Tim O’Brien
4. Larry Foster	9. Joyce Hergenhan	14. Kurt Stocker
5. Ed Block	10. Jon Iwata	15. Richard Edelman

Module Activity: Video Clip Questions

The following discussion questions are designed to encourage critical thinking on crisis management. After watching the video clips, students answer the following questions. You can use the additional information provided to help with grading or facilitating class discussion.

1. What is the first and most important thing to do in a crisis situation?

For teachers:

In a crisis situation, the first thing an organization must do is to focus on the problem and act immediately. As Peter Debreceeny discusses in his interview, when a disaster happens, promptly move your crisis plan into action, stay focused and ahead of the situation. Otherwise, you will

be consumed by the crisis and loose control. Keep communication simple and clear. Do everything possible to get ahead of the situation. (See the video clip of [Peter Debreceeny](#))

Similarly, Larry Foster also highlights the importance of taking timely action when a crisis happens. Foster comments that the greatest mistake people make when handling emergency situations is timing; people don't realize how important it is to take action in order to manage a disaster. What the public wants in times of crisis is action rather than inaction, hesitance, or silence. (See the video clip of the [Larry Foster/Dick Martin Interview](#))

2. In a crisis situation, media are powerful; how the press responds to a given situation has a great deal to do with how the public responds. Thus, what should public relations practitioners do when they speak to the media?

For teachers:

Given that media might amplify negative effects in a crisis situation, public relations practitioners should be able to strategically use media to mitigate the negative attitude and convert negative to positive. Anne Barkelew explains her experience at Dayton Hudson in 1990, when the Dayton Hudson Foundation announced that it was pulling funding from Planned Parenthood. Ann immediately published an op-ed in *The New York Times* to counterbalance the negative attitudes about the company. (See the video clip of [Anne Barkelew](#))

Larry Foster emphasizes the importance of using media to swiftly convey intention and action. It is critical to inform the public about a company's position and explain why it is acting a certain way. If the company doesn't tell the public what it is yearning to know, the media could respond negatively and then so might the public. (See the video clip of [Larry Foster/Dick Martin](#))

Similarly, Charlotte Otto mentions that *what* and *how* Proctor and Gamble responded to the media during a crisis played a critical role in managing that situation. In Otto's case, P&G performed more than media relations by engaging and communicating with the public, which proved to be effective when compared to dealing with the media only. (See the video clip of

[Charlotte Otto](#)). In the cases of Dayton Hudson and Proctor & Gamble, the two organizations came out of crisis situations in a strong position, which is exactly what the public relations practitioner wants.

3. As the Internet has developed, it has greatly influenced organizational and media communications. For organizations, what are the challenges and advantages in managing a crisis? What do you think about the role of the Internet in terms of managing a crisis?

For teachers:

Users can encourage students to brainstorm the challenges and advantages of media technology and discuss how the challenges and advantages impact the practice of public relations in times of crisis situations.

As we are now in the Internet or web 2.0 age, information technologies have provided both challenges and advantages when managing a crisis because the speed and scope of information transmission and information sharing is unprecedented. As Marilyn Laurie comments on the future of public relations, new media technologies bring challenges to organizations in how they deal with transparency issues and engage a multicultural public. (See the video clip of [Marilyn Laurie](#))

Other PR professionals also allude to the impact of media technology in the practice of public relations. The most important challenge is how organizations manage the fast speed and wide scope of information available to the public, especially that information unfavorable to their organizations. (Refer to clips of [Peter Debreceeny](#), [Larry Foster/Dick Martin](#), and [Tim O'Brien](#))

Module Activity: Reading and Question

In Alleen Pincus's article "Media and Crisis Communications: The Role of the CEO", Pincus emphasizes the important role of the CEO to maintain open communication during a crisis.

Students will follow this [link](#) and read the article, in which Pincus lists the five steps to ensure that the CEO plays the role of central communicator. Students will answer the fourth question.

4. What is a CEO's role in crisis situations?

For teachers:

Instructors can encourage students to think about the role of CEOs in crisis situations by asking students to compare the daily jobs of a CEO under normal conditions, i.e. non-crisis situations and jobs during a disaster.

Pincus lists the following steps for CEO's to follow:

- The CEO is expected to be the information source for key audiences, not for operational details.
- The CEO is one of several spokespersons working together to present well-coordinated messages.
- The CEO is the central communicator to both the internal and external audiences, but especially the internal audience (i.e. employees).
- Keep the CEO's voice and message in the forefront of communications with the media and the public.
- Keep the CEO in touch with those impacted by the crisis.

In this article, the authors approach the role of the CEO during a crisis from two perspectives. On the one hand, if the CEO is capable of connecting with stakeholders in a compelling and credible manner, he/she should play the role of the chief communicator in a crisis. On the other hand, the CEO also plays the role of the chief overseer in a crisis, and therefore should not be the only communicator. This is indicated in Pincus's second point: The CEO is one of several spokespersons working together to present well-coordinated messages. Overall, the CEO should be the chief crisis manager; he/she should play the role of a team leader

during a crisis, and be able to communicate, coordinate, and oversee the process of handling the crisis. As emergency situations vary from one case to another, the role of the CEO should be adjusted according to specific situations, as the following quote indicates:

“The reality is that each organization is different, and the role of the CEO needs to be fine-tuned accordingly. For example, small companies or community-based organizations may need to use their CEOs more aggressively in communications. When a crisis strikes, it's important to evaluate the nature of the issue, its potential impact, and audience expectations to determine how to best calibrate the role of the CEO” (Gidez, 2010.)

Source: Gidez, C., & Lawrence, M. (2010). Should a CEO be a company's primary spokesperson during a crisis? *PRweek*, 13(8), 27-27. Retrieved from the following [link](#).

Module Activity: Additional Reading and Questions

An ethical approach to managing crises is critical. Students will follow the link and read the news article “[Internal Ethics and the Crisis Communications Machinery](#)” in *PR News* (Nov. 2006). This news article focuses on the importance of ethical corporate culture in crisis management. After reading the article, students will answer the following questions.

5. What is the role of ethics in crisis situations?

For teachers:

Maintaining ethical behavior throughout a crisis situation is essential. As the article argues, “one cannot communicate effectively if language and intentions are laced with insincerity or deliberate deception.”

As trust is fragile, especially in emergency situations, organizations must be vigilant as they rebuild the public’s trust of a brand or an organization. On the other hand, given that public

relations seems to have a bad reputation in general, as the article says, PR practitioners need to act in an honest and ethical manner when dealing with a crisis.

6. What is the “first step” for public relations practitioners in encouraging an ethical organizational environment?

For teachers:

The “first step” for public relations practitioners to encourage an ethical organizational environment is to be aware that a problem actually exists. However, acknowledging the existence of a problem is far from enough; public relations practitioners should also be willing to act, and “fight the good fight on behalf of ethics,” as the article points out.

The article also notes that efforts should come from all aspects of the organization, the education institutions, and the society at large, in order to foster an honest and ethical environment, as it would be hard for public relations practitioners alone to have the power to ensure an ethical environment.

Module Activity: Final Reading and Questions

Crisis managers should use proper strategies that reflect greater acceptance of responsibility. It is necessary to determine the type of crisis before developing a strategy. Coombs (2007) suggested a list of crisis types and strategies and how to apply these strategies. Students will follow the [link](#) and read the article “Crisis Management and Communications.” After reading the article, students will answer the following questions.

7. What are the crisis types based on attributions of crisis responsibility?

For teachers:

Coombs (2007) argues that there are three categories and 10 crisis types, according to attributions of crisis responsibility:

Category 1 - Victim Crises: Minimal Crisis Responsibility

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

Category 2 - Accident Crises: Low Crisis Responsibility

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

Category 3 - Preventable Crises: Strong Crisis Responsibility

8. *Human-error accidents*: industrial accidents caused by human error
9. *Human-error product harm*: product is defective or potentially harmful due to human error
10. *Organizational misdeed*: management actions that put stakeholders at risk and/or violate law

8. What are the attribution theory-based crisis communication best practices? From the video materials on the Center's website, find examples to illustrate crisis situations, then identify the crisis type and discuss what type of crisis communication practice was used.

For teachers:

Best practices for crisis management from Coombs (2007):

- Immediately provide information and instructions to victims of the crisis.
- Express sympathy toward the victims and inform the public of ways the organization will change its behavior to prevent future crises.

- If the organization is minimally responsible for the crisis (natural disaster, rumors, workplace violence, product tampering) and has a strong reputation with no history of crisis, then providing information to victims and expressing sympathy are adequate responses.
- If the organization is minimally responsible for the crisis (natural disaster, rumors, workplace violence, product tampering) but has a poor reputation or has a history of crisis, then in addition to providing information to victims and expressing sympathy toward victims, the organization should engage in additional strategies. It should attempt to minimize the perception of damage caused by the crisis, deny the intent to harm victims and/or assert their inability to control the source of the crisis.
- If the crisis was caused by an accident for which the organization should take partial responsibility (inappropriate operations, technical error accident, product harm due to technical error), and the organization has a strong reputation with no history of crisis, then in addition to providing information to victims and expressing sympathy toward victims, the organization should engage in additional strategies. It should attempt to minimize the perception of damage caused by the crisis, deny the intent to harm victims and/or assert their inability to control the source of the crisis when appropriate.
- If the crisis was caused by an accident for which the organization should take partial responsibility (inappropriate operations, technical error accident, product harm due to technical error), and the organization has a poor reputation or history of crisis, then in addition to providing information to victims and expressing sympathy toward victims, the organization should compensate victims, take full responsibility for the crisis, and ask forgiveness of publics.
- If the crisis was caused by human error and the organization is entirely or primarily responsible for the damage (human-error accidents, human-error product harm, or organizational misdeeds), regardless of reputation or history of crisis, in addition to providing information to victims and expressing sympathy toward victims, the organization should compensate victims, take full responsibility for the crisis, and ask forgiveness of publics.
- Victims should always be compensated whenever they suffer harm.

- Reminding the public of past good works of the organization, and praising individuals for their actions during a crisis are good strategies regardless of crisis type.
- If the crisis is based on rumor or stakeholder accusations of inappropriate operations, then the organization may consider denying the crisis or confronting the accusers if appropriate.

The following table provides some reference about crisis types and corresponding crisis communication practices in some PR crisis management cases. Instructors can refer back to some of the video clips about PR crisis management and encourage students to have an open discussion about the practices used and what other practices could have been used.

Cases	Crisis Type	Crisis Communication Practice
Dayton Hudson (Anne Barkelew)	Rumors	Open to discussion. Refer to Practice 10.
Allstate (Peter Debreceeny)	Natural Disasters	Practices 1, 2., and 3.
Proctor & Gamble (Charlotte Otto)	Rumors and organizational misdeed	Open to discussion
IBM (Jon Iwata)	Rumors	Open to discussion
Eli Lilly (Ron Culp)	Rumors and human-error product harm	Open to discussion Consider Practices 7, 8, and 9.
AT&T (Ed Block)	Organizational misdeed	Open to discussion

Additional Readings

Gaschen, D. J. (2003). Crisis - What crisis? Taking your crisis communications plan for a test drive. *Public Relations Tactics*, 10(5), 12.

Lukaszewski, J. E. (1997). Establishing individual and corporate crisis communication standards: the principles and protocols. *Public Relations Quarterly*, 42(3), 7-14.

- Baron, G., & Philbin, J. (2009). Social media in crisis communication: Start with a drill. *Public Relations Tactics*, 16(4), 12.
- Adams, W. C. (2000). Responding to the media during a crisis: It's what you say and when you say it. *Public Relations Quarterly*, 45(1), 26-28.
- Coombs, W. Timothy. (1998). An analytic framework for crisis situations: Better responses from a better understanding of the situation. *Journal of Public Relations Research*, 10(3), 177-191.

Additional Resources

- Arthur W. Page Society Case Studies: *Merck & Co.: Gardasil Case Study 2008* ([link](#))
- Arthur W. Page Society Case Studies: JetBlue Airways: Regaining Altitude After the Valentine's Day Massacre of 2007 ([link](#))
- Foster, L. G. (2002) Tylenol 20 years later. *Public Relations Strategist*, 8(4), 16-20. ([link](#))
- Goodman, P. S. (August 10, 2010). In Case of Emergency: What Not to Do. *The New York Times*. ([link](#))
- Toyota's Digital Disaster. (February 2, 2010). *The Daily Beast* from *Newsweek*. ([link](#))

References

- Internal Ethics and the Crisis Communications Machinery. (November 2006). *PR News*. Retrieved from http://www.prnewsonline.com/legalpr/News_InternalEthics.html
- Coombs, W. T. (Oct. 30, 2007). Crisis Management and Communications. Retrieved from <http://www.instituteforpr.org/topics/crisis-management-and-communications/>