1

Defining Crisis Communication

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

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

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

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

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

Figure 1.1 The Chinese symbol for crisis

nevertheless, crises provide opportunities with the potential to leave the organization stronger in some ways than it was before the crisis.

If we do not study crisis communication, organizations and the many people associated with them are likely to be stunned, frightened, and depressed when enveloped by a crisis. In fact, some organizations communicate so poorly in the wake of a crisis that they are forever weakened, having lost the confidence of both their members and the public.

This book presents strategies accumulated over many years of research, as well as our experience as organizational consultants, emphasizing the opportunities in a crisis rather than the calamities of these events. The chapters illustrate key communication lessons to create renewal, growth, and opportunity following a crisis. At the crux of our argument is the contention that effective communication skills are essential to creating positive, renewing opportunities at these turning points.

The book is organized into three parts. Part 1, containing the first four chapters, serves as the foundation, explaining our approach to creating renewal and opportunity following a crisis. Chapter 1 defines crisis communication and explains the many types of crises that one may experience. Chapter 2 focuses on the role of uncertainty in crisis situations. Every crisis carries with it some level of uncertainty. This chapter contains 10 lessons for effectively communicating under the uncertainty of a crisis. Chapter 3 contains 10 lessons for communicating effectively during a crisis. Chapter 4 delineates 10 leadership lessons for effective crisis communication. Part I thus provides the tools for effective crisis communication through several lessons for creating opportunity and renewal following a crisis.

Part II provides different cases to illustrate and provide examples of this knowledge. It contains five chapters that address different crisis types, such as industrial disasters, outbreaks of food-borne illness, terrorism, natural disasters, and financial meltdowns. Each chapter contains three case studies along with a listing of the lessons from Part I. As you examine each case, you are asked to make the call regarding the effectiveness of the crisis response. Through this approach, these chapters illustrate how to apply the lessons discussed in the first section of the book.

Part III contains chapters on learning through failure, risk communication, communication ethics, and a final chapter on inspiring renewal following a crisis. This part describes several content areas that every crisis communicator should consider as opportunities in crisis situations. In Chapter 10, we explain how organizations can improve their crisis preparation and response capacity by learning through their failures. In Chapter 11, we demonstrate how effective risk communication provides crisis communicators opportunities to prevent future

crises. Chapter 12 examines the ethical implications of crisis and the opportunities provided by strong ethical stances and communication. Chapter 13 proposes a theory of effective crisis communication we call the *discourse of renewal*. We provide a description of this theory along with its applications to crisis communication. Throughout the book, we turn to a small group of landmark cases to illustrate the various aspects being discussed.

A Definition of Crisis Communication

Initially, we need to clarify what we mean by *crisis*. In daily conversation, the word is used quite casually. As a simple experiment, listen to the people around you for a day or two. Most likely, you will hear friends, fellow employees, or fellow students describe routine problems they are facing—fender benders, forgotten appointments, disgruntled mothers-in-law, bad hair days, or losing records of favorite university football teams—as crises. All are bad experiences; however, they are not, by our definition, crises. Similarly, with some degree of regularity, organizations face events, such as unexpectedly low sales or the defection of key employees. Again, these are difficult times for organizations, but they are not necessarily crises. *Crises are unique moments in the history of organizations.*

In a classic study, Hermann (1963) identified three characteristics separating crises from other unpleasant occurrences:

1. Surprise
2. Threat
3. Short response time

A troubling event cannot reach the level of crisis without coming as a surprise, posing a serious level of threat, and forcing a short response time. Let's take a moment to define Hermann's characteristics of crisis.

Surprise

Even naturally occurring events, such as floods, earthquakes, and forest fires, do not escalate to the level of crisis unless they come at a time or a level of intensity beyond the expectations of government officials and residents. For example, weather conditions combined in such a way that the wildfires in the San Diego area during the summer of 2003 overwhelmed existing management plans, thereby introducing a

degree of surprise to the situation. Hundreds of homes were lost, some residents and firefighters were killed, and the region was declared a disaster area.

At the same time, because of thoughtful planning, dedicated firefighters, and a dose of luck, dozens of other blazes in drought-stricken areas around the country were contained before they became crises. In these cases, city and government officials knew that fires were likely and developed fire management plans; as a result, events did not exceed their planning. In San Diego, unfortunately, the fires quickly exceeded the scope of the management plan. The result was a surprising intensity that reached the level of crisis.

Threat

All crises create threatening circumstances that reach beyond the typical problems organizations face. The threat of a crisis can affect the organization's financial security, its customers, residents living near a production facility, and others. For example, when a BP oil rig exploded in the Gulf of Mexico in 2010 and spilled millions of gallons of oil into the Gulf, the crisis threat was widespread. The considerable amount of oil on the water's surface was devastating to the fishing industry in the area. Birds and other sea animals were also impacted by the spill, thereby adding levels of threat to the ecosystem of the region. To begin to learn about the effects of the oil spill, BP initially contributed $500 million through a Gulf of Mexico Research Initiative to study the short- and long-term effects of the oil spill on the environment and marine life. One would expect the response and recovery efforts, along with a complete understanding of the effects of the oil spill on the Gulf of Mexico, to continue for many years.

Oil spills occur with some regularity worldwide. They are usually contained quickly, causing little long-term damage. Oil spills seldom reach the crisis level. In BP's case, however, the amount of oil spilled created a heightened threat level. Ultimately, the crisis became the largest environmental disaster in U.S. history.

Short Response Time

The threatening nature of crises means that they must be addressed quickly. BP was criticized initially for not communicating and

responding more quickly to the crisis. In addition the company was criticized for not having clear risk and crisis communication provisions in place for a disaster of this magnitude. As a result, after the explosion, the crisis appeared to be beyond BP's control as oil rapidly gushed into the water. Tony Hayward, the CEO of BP at the time of the crisis, was regularly criticized for minimizing the scope and intensity of the crisis and for lacking compassion and empathy in his initial postcrisis responses. Organizations must provide effective communication immediately following the crisis. This can be difficult due to the inherent uncertainty of crisis events and because little is often known about the cause of the crisis. However, organizations have a short window to take control of the crisis and set the tone for the response and recovery efforts.

As you can see from these examples, one of the most frustrating and distressing aspects of crisis is the persistent urgency of the situation. This urgency is compounded by the fact that a crisis comes as a surprise and introduces extreme threat into a situation.

A Working Definition

In this book, we discuss organizational crises of many types, ranging from those caused by industrial accidents to natural disasters. To account for all of these types, we offer the following description as a working definition of organizational crisis:

> An organizational crisis is a specific, *unexpected*, and *nonroutine* event or series of events that create high levels of *uncertainty* and simultaneously present an organization with both *opportunities* for and *threats* to its *high-priority goals*.

As we have established, much of the intensity of a crisis comes with some degree of surprise. Even in cases where there are clear warning signs, most people are still surprised when a crisis actually occurs. Thus, crises are almost always unexpected events. Because they exceed any planning expectations, they cannot be managed with routine procedures. Once an organization abandons its routine procedures, its leadership is faced with managing this uncertainty by emphasizing either opportunities for growth or renewal or threat to the organization's image or reputation in their crisis communication. See Table 1.1 for a description of each component in our working definition.

Table 1.1 Key Components of a Working Definition of Organizational Crisis

Unexpected	An event comes as a surprise. This surprise may be something for which the organization could not have anticipated or planned. It could also result from conditions that exceed even the most aggressive crisis management plans.
Nonroutine	Problems occur daily in nearly all organizations. To account for these problems, organizations engage in routine procedures. Crises are events that cannot be managed by routine procedures. Instead, crises require unique and often extreme measures.
Produces uncertainty	Because they are unexpected and beyond the routine actions of organizations, crises produce tremendous uncertainty. Organizations cannot be aware of all causes and ultimate effects of crises without some degree of investigation. Efforts to reduce uncertainty may continue for months or even years after a crisis.
Creates opportunities	Crises create opportunities that may not be available during normal business opportunities. Crises create opportunities to learn, make strategic changes, grow, or develop new competitive advantages.
Threat to image, reputation, or high-priority goals	Crises can produce an intense level of threat to the organization and its affiliates. This threat is often described as damage to the image or reputation of an organization. However, crises can also be threatening enough to permanently destroy an organization.

Crisis and Risk

Note that the foregoing definition does not mention risk. We separate crisis and risk because we believe that, while risk is a natural part of life, crisis can often be avoided. Naturally, some people live with more risk in their lives than others. For example, some people choose to live next to oil refineries, on hurricane-prone coasts, or in areas susceptible to mudslides or forest fires. Please understand, however, that crisis and risk are closely connected, as poor risk communication can cause a crisis. In Chapter 11, we talk more about the opportunities associated with effective risk communication.

Types of Crises

Now, with that definition of organizational crisis in mind, think about some of the events that would qualify as a crisis. Have you been in a crisis situation either directly or indirectly? You may not have faced a Fortune 500 company bankruptcy, but you may have witnessed a flood, an organizational leader's dishonesty, a food-borne illness outbreak at a national restaurant chain, a catastrophic industrial fire, or the wide-reaching impacts of a terrorist event. All of these incidents can be described as crisis situations.

Crisis communication scholars develop classification systems of crisis types to assist them in their crisis planning and, in so doing, reduce the uncertainty when crises occur. The simplest and possibly the most useful distinction to make in crisis types is to divide them into two categories: intentionally caused crises and crises caused by natural, uncontrollable factors. When crisis planners attempt to think the unthinkable in terms of guessing all of the potential crises they could face, the list is not only endless, but it is also unique to the organization. We do not pretend to list every possible type of crisis that could be caused by intentional or unintentional acts. Rather, we provide a list of categories into which most crises fall.

Intentional Crises

We identify seven general categories for crises that are initiated by intentional acts designed to harm an organization:

1. Terrorism
2. Sabotage
3. Workplace Violence
4. Poor Employee Relationships
5. Poor Risk Management
6. Hostile Takeovers
7. Unethical Leadership

Since the distressing events that occurred on September 11, 2001, *terrorism* tops the list of the most urgent intentional causes of crisis. Organizations of all types must now be aware of their vulnerability to terrorist acts that can disrupt both the organization and the nation as a whole.

Organizations are also vulnerable to *sabotage*, which involves the intentional damaging of a product or the working capacity of the organization by someone inside the organization. Typically, sabotage is done for revenge or for some benefit, such as economic gain. Similarly, *workplace violence* has become all too common in the United States. Distressed over their perceived mistreatment by an organization, employees or former employees undertake violent acts. Sadly, this form of violence has become more frequent even on college campuses. The result is often multiple injuries, deaths, and disruption of the organization and its workforce.

Wide-scale crises can also result from *poor employee relationships*. If an organization cannot develop positive relationships between management and its workers, trouble is likely to occur. For example, an organization could develop a reputation of having poor working conditions. If these conditions persist, the organization is likely to have difficulty both retaining and recruiting employees. Without enough qualified employees, an organization cannot continue to function.

Another possibility is that, when unionized employees may become very frustrated with their working conditions, they choose to take some action, such as striking. In most cases, employee strikes adversely affect an organization's financial stability. We realize that poor employee relationships are not responsible for all strikes or employee turnover problems. We are convinced, however, that when turnover and strikes lead to crisis situations, the relationships between management and employees are often controversial.

If organizations are guilty of *poor risk management*, the outcomes can be disastrous for consumers, employees, or both. For example, a beef processing plant in a Midwestern city failed to adequately maintain its sewer system, creating a dangerous public health hazard. The sewer system overflowed, sending foul-smelling cattle waste and remnants from the slaughter process directly into a river flowing through the community of nearly 100,000 people. The ultimate consequence of this poor risk management was heavy fines that forced the plant to close.

Although there are fewer now than in the 1980s, *hostile takeovers* are still a major threat to organizations. Simply put, hostile takeovers occur when the majority of an organization's stock is purchased by a rival organization. The result can be an overthrow of the current leadership and the dismantling of the organization. Hundreds or thousands of employees can find themselves unemployed due to actions that have taken place completely outside their workplace. Federal regulations address some of the issues related to hostile takeovers, but such aggressive assaults on organizations still exist.

The broadest and most inclusive subcategory of intentional crises is *unethical leadership*. An extensive review of more than 6,000 newsworthy organizational crisis events reported annually by the Institute for Crisis Management found that management was in some way responsible for the majority of them. Worse, many of these crises were caused by criminal acts of managers (Millar & Irvine, 1996). We dedicate Chapter 12 of this book to ethics. At this point, we want to emphasize that unethical behavior can and often is the ultimate cause of a crisis situation. When an organization's leadership knowingly puts its workers, consumers, investors, or the surrounding community at risk without being honest about that risk, two events are likely to occur. First, a breakdown in the system occurs, which often results in a crisis. Second, when the public learns of the organizational leadership's dishonesty, it is likely to be unforgiving. Thus, the road to recovery is likely to be much longer for dishonest leaders than it is for honest leaders.

Unintentional Crises

Clearly, not all crises are caused by the intentional acts of individuals with questionable motives. Rather, many are simply unforeseeable or unavoidable. In this section, we describe five types of unintentional crises:

1. Natural Disasters
2. Disease Outbreaks
3. Unforeseeable Technical Interactions
4. Product Failure
5. Downturns in the Economy

Like all of us, organizations are vulnerable to *natural disasters*. Tornadoes, hurricanes, floods, wildfires, and earthquakes have the potential to destroy organizations' and industries' physical plants and entire communities. Although these events are largely unpredictable, some steps can be taken to reduce their impact on an organization. For example, building a nuclear reactor on or near an existing earthquake fault line would be unwise. Similarly, locating an organization in an area that is uncommonly susceptible to floods or tropical storms is indefensible. The earthquake in Haiti was much more damaging because of poor building practices. In short, organizations must take into account possible threats of natural disasters before they invest in their facilities. A natural disaster can be made much worse due to decisions made by

organizations. Despite this caution, natural disasters are unavoidable as potential crises.

Disease outbreaks are an inevitable form of crisis. Some of these occur naturally. For example, the H1N1 virus caused worldwide alarm in 2009. Other crises, such as food-borne illness, occur due to organizational failure. For example, Schwan's Sales Enterprises discovered that its ice cream, distributed nationally, was contaminated with salmonella. Thousands of consumers became ill. Schwan's successful crisis recovery was based largely on the fact that the company responded quickly with a recall in an effort to limit the number of illnesses caused by the tainted product. Product failures at some level are nearly impossible to prevent. The severity and frequency of these failures, however, can be reduced significantly with good crisis planning.

Many of the malfunctions that lead to crises are the result of *unforeseeable technical interactions*. In his classic text, *Normal Accidents,* Charles Perrow (1999) describes dozens of examples of organizations whose monitoring and safety equipment became inaccurate and inoperable due to a series of seemingly unrelated errors or equipment failures. For example, he describes how a commercial aircraft was forced to crash-land after a coffeemaker shorted out, causing an electrical fire in a series of wires and disabling other safety equipment and vital control systems. In this case, the pilots and maintenance crew were following all of the prescribed procedures. The coffeemaker was wired appropriately. The crisis resulted from an almost unimaginable sequence of events piling on top of one another.

Product recalls are rather commonplace. Organizations discover unintended risks or flaws in a product, issue a recall, repair or replace the product or refund the purchase price, and move forward. Americans are so used to recalls based on *product failure* that many consumers weigh the inconvenience of having a product repaired or replaced against the risk posed by a flawed product. In many cases, consumers do not even respond to the recall. Some, however, reach crisis level. For example, in 2010, Toyota Motor Company recalled several of their top cars and trucks due to faulty accelerator pedals and possible floor mat entrapment of the accelerator pedal. Toyota sent letters to their customers, used media like YouTube to communicate about the recall, and extended hours at dealer service centers to make sure customer cars were fixed as quickly as possible.

Last, organizations of nearly every kind are subject to crises caused by *downturns in the economy*. Even organizations that are ethical, thoughtful in their planning, and strict in their maintenance of safety regulations can be victims of economic crises. If consumers cannot afford an organization's

products, there is little opportunity to resolve the situation with better communication. Downsizing and plant closings are often the result of economic downturns. From 2008 through 2010, the United States experienced one of the worst financial downturns in the economy since the Great Depression. The crisis, caused by increased risk taking by the banking industry and the collapse of the housing market, led to a complete collapse of our financial system. Businesses large and small had no access to credit, and as a result, several large banks, such as Lehman Brothers, Merrill Lynch & Co., Washington Mutual, and Wachovia Corporation, went bankrupt or were taken over by other companies. In addition, companies like General Motors (GM) and Chrysler also declared bankruptcy due to a lack of access to credit and the downturn in the economy. Economic downturns can create unexpected crises that have consequences that are far-reaching beyond the organizations that are responsible for creating the problems.

The Significance of Crisis in a Global Environment

Organizational crises are a consistent part of our existence. We cannot prevent them and, as consumers, we cannot avoid them. Worse, crises are becoming more prevalent. Perrow (1999) explains that as technology continues to advance and as our population continues to grow, we are increasingly exposed to and affected by crises that we could not have imagined 20 or 30 years ago.

As consumers, we are also dependent on more organizations than ever before. Twenty-five years ago, the Internet was a concept, cable television was considered a luxury, satellite television was in its infancy, and cell phones were nearly the size of chainsaws. Now, these technologies and the organizations that support them are central features in our daily lives. As we become more and more dependent on the services of an increasing number of organizations and technologies, our exposure to potential crises naturally increases.

In addition, as we move closer to a truly global society, the incidents on one continent can create a crisis an ocean away. Think of the impact that the most recent economic downturn had on the global economy. Excessive risk taking in one economy can create a global recession. Another example of our global society is our food system. As we mentioned earlier, the 2008 crisis that began in China had severe effects for many infants and young children across the world who drank imported milk products tainted with artificially inflated levels of the protein supplement melamine. This crisis resulted in many countries banning,

recalling, or creating more elaborate testing measures for any milk products produced in China. As our world becomes more complex and interconnected, centralized, and efficient the frequency and forms of crises will steadily increase. Understanding how to effectively engage in crisis communication, then, is a skill ever increasing in value.

Defining Crisis Communication Theory and Practice

In order to define and better understand crises of all types, researchers have developed theories to better understand and manage these events (see Table 1.2). Crises are studied by a wide variety of disciplines including psychology (Morgan, Fischhoff, Bostrom, & Atman, 2002; Slovic, 1987), sociology (Chess, 2001; Clarke & Chess, 2008; Mileti & Peek, 2000; Mileti & Sorensen, 1990; Quarantelli, 1988), business (Mitroff, 2005; Mitroff & Anagnos, 2001; Weick, 1988; Weick & Sutcliffe, 2007), mathematics and physics (Bak, 1996; Lorenz, 1993; Mandelbrot, 1977), political science (Birkland, 2006; Comfort, Sungu, Johnson, & Dunn, 2001; Ramo, 2009) among others. In addition, there are a number of practitioners who have written books about crisis communication (Reynolds, 2002; Witt & Morgan, 2002). James Lee Witt, former director of FEMA from 1993 to 2001, provides clear advice about effective crisis communication through his experiences managing major natural disasters. Barbara Reynolds provides a guide for crisis and emergency risk communication based upon her considerable experience communicating about public health outbreaks around the world. Each of these disciplines and practitioners has contributed greatly to defining and better understanding how to manage crises.

Psychology, for instance, provides theoretical background on mental model approaches to crisis communication and the social amplification of risk and crisis communication. These theories help us to better understand how people cognitively perceive and ultimately respond to risk and crisis situations. Sociology provides theories on how to conduct evacuations during all types of disasters and how communities respond to these disasters. The field of business examines sensemaking processes of leadership before, during, and after a crisis; the role of organizational learning in response to crisis; as well as organizational structures that exemplify a crisis-prepared or crisis-prone organization. Mathematics and physics produced chaos and complexity theories that have been used widely in the communication discipline as metaphors for the disruption and self-organization produced by crisis events (Gilpin &

Table 1.2 Academic Disciplines Contributing to Understanding of Risk and Crisis Communication

Discipline	Theory Contribution
Psychology	Mental models approach to risk and crisis communication Social amplification of risk and crisis perceptions
Sociology	Disaster evacuation theory Social response to disasters Social and institutional networks during disasters
Business	Organizational sensemaking theory Organizational learning theory High reliability organizational theory
Mathematics and Physics	Chaos theory Complexity theory Sandpile/Self-organized criticality theory
Political Science	Policy change theory and catastrophic disasters Deep security theory

Murphy, 2008; Murphy, 1996; Sellnow, Seeger, & Ulmer, 2002). Political science provides theories, such as Ramo's (2009) deep security theory, that build upon complexity and network theories for policymakers to prepare and respond to crises such as terrorism. For full discussions of the interdisciplinary approach to crisis communication and the theoretical approaches associated with them, take a look at one of the recent handbooks on risk and crisis communication (Coombs & Holladay, 2010; Heath & O'Hair, 2009; Pearson, Roux-Dufort, & Clair, 2007). You will find that many of the lessons described in the upcoming chapters are grounded in the interdisciplinary research described above. However, the communication discipline has produced considerable research on crisis communication. What follows is a discussion of the theories of crisis communication.

For the past 20 years, communication researchers have developed theoretical approaches for responding to organizational crises (see Table 1.3). This research includes Corporate Apologia (Hearit, 2006), Image Repair Theory (Benoit, 1995), Situational Crisis Communication Theory (Coombs & Holladay, 2002), and Organizational Renewal (Ulmer, Sellnow, & Seeger, 2009). Corporate Apologia, Image Repair Theory, and Situational Crisis Communication Theory identify

strategies an organization can use to repair its image and reputation after a crisis. Organizational Renewal focuses on learning from the crisis, communicating ethically, considering both the threat and the opportunities associated with the crisis, and creating a prospective vision. We briefly examine each of these research traditions.

Corporate Apologia

Research on Corporate Apologia was initially conceptualized as the speech of self-defense (Ware & Linkugel, 1973). Hearit (2001) defines an apologia as not exactly an apology but rather "a response to criticism that seeks to present a compelling competing account of organizational

Table 1.3 Theories of Crisis Communication

Theory	Characteristics
Corporate Apologia	Emphasizes managing the threat created by a persuasive attack against an organization Focuses on an apology for wrongdoing Features communication strategies for the apology
Image Repair Theory	Emphasizes repairing the threat to the image of the accused Focuses on accounting for organizational actions that caused the crisis Features communication strategies for managing the account
Situational Crisis Communication Theory	Emphasizes lowering crisis attributions of responsibility for the crisis Focuses on determining communication based upon the type of crisis and the organization's reputational assets Features flow-chart decision-making process for using crisis response strategies to influence stakeholder perceptions or attributions of responsibility
Organizational Renewal Theory	Emphasizes opportunities to learn and grow from the crisis Focuses on creating opportunities inherent to crisis events Features broad leadership and organizational communication guidelines, emphasizing strong positive values, an optimistic forward-looking perspective, and learning to overcome the crisis

accusations" (p. 502). In this case, crises are created by an accusation of wrongdoing. Hearit and Courtright (2004) explain that apologetic crises "are the result of charges leveled by corporate actors (e.g., media or public interest groups) who contend that an organization is guilty of wrongdoing" (p. 210). Corporate Apologia provides a list of communication strategies that the organization can use to respond to these accusations. These communication strategies include: "denial, counterattack, differentiation, apology, and legal" (Hearit, 2006, p. 15). These strategies are primarily defensive and are designed principally for an organization to account for its actions after a crisis.

Image Repair Theory

Benoit (1995) developed a comprehensive theory of image repair. Image refers to how the organization is perceived by its stakeholders and publics. Similar to Corporate Apologia, Benoit (1997) explains that "the key to understanding image repair strategies is to consider the nature of attacks or complaints that prompt such responses" (p. 178). He suggests that two components of the attack are essential. First, the organization must be "held responsible for an action" (Benoit, 1997, p. 178). Second, "that [action must be] considered offensive (Benoit, 1997, p. 178). Benoit's (1995) theory contains a list of 14 impression management strategies. Five major strategies include denial, evasion of responsibility, reducing the offensiveness of the event, corrective action, and mortification. Each strategy can be used individually or in combination (Sellnow & Ulmer, 1995; Sellnow, Ulmer, & Snider, 1998). Consistent with Corporate Apologia, Benoit's image repair strategies focus on how organizations respond to accusations or account for their actions after being accused of a transgression. An effective response is designed to repair the organization's damaged image or reputation.

Situational Crisis Communication Theory

A third prominent theory on crisis communication is Situational Crisis Communication Theory. Coombs developed this theory by linking attribution theory and crisis response strategies (Coombs, 2007; Coombs & Halladay, 2002). His theory "evaluates the reputational threat posed by the crisis situation and then recommends crisis response strategies based upon the reputational threat level" (p. 138). The crisis response strategies in this approach are a synthesis of work on Corporate Apologia, Impression Management, and Image Repair Theory. He developed the list by selecting "those [strategies] that

appeared on two or more lists developed by crisis experts" (p. 139). He describes four major communication approaches, including denial, diminishment, rebuilding, and bolstering. In all, he delineates 10 crisis response strategies. The crisis communication strategies are then used according to the threat to the organization's reputation based upon "crisis type, crisis history, and prior reputation" (Coombs, 2007, p. 141).

Coombs (2007) explains that crisis type can be defined by three categories: "victim crisis cluster, accidental crisis cluster, and preventable crisis cluster" (p. 142). The victim cluster involves crises such as natural disasters, rumors, workplace violence, and malevolence. Accidental crises involve challenges, technical error accidents, and technical error product harm. Preventable crises include human error, accidents, human error product harm, and organizational misdeeds. Beyond crisis type, crisis response strategies should also be selected according to the organization's crisis history and prior reputation.

Crisis history and prior reputation are important because organizations that have recurring crises or poor reputations are not likely to have their messages accepted by stakeholders. Coombs's theory is based upon the idea that, after a crisis, stakeholders "assign responsibility for negative unexpected events" (p. 138). Depending upon the crisis type, crisis history, and prior reputation, Coombs provides crisis response recommendations to address the attributions of responsibility toward the organization.

Organizational Renewal Theory

As you have seen in the previous three theories, much of the research on crisis communication focuses on managing the threat to the image or reputation of the organization during a crisis. We argue there is also potential for positive discourse following a crisis that emphasizes the opportunities inherent to crises. Reputation and image are important organizational concepts, but they do not always play a central role in resolving organizational crises. The upcoming cases in this book provide many examples in which rebuilding, learning, and opportunity are more important than reputation or image. For this reason, we argue that crises also carry the potential for opportunity. To illustrate this idea, we developed a theory we call the *Discourse of Renewal* that emphasizes learning growth and opportunity following crises of all types. We provide a complete description of the theory in the last chapter of the book. We see four theoretical objectives central to the discourse of renewal: organizational learning, ethical communication, a prospective rather

than retrospective vision, and sound organizational rhetoric. We discuss this theory in much more depth in the final chapter of the book. However, what follows is a brief description of each of the theoretical components of our theory.

Organizational Learning

We believe that an organization that emerges successfully from a crisis must learn from the event. Chapter 10 provides an in-depth understanding of how organizations and communities can learn through failures, including crises. It is also important that the organization illustrates to stakeholders how its learning will help ensure that it will not experience a similar crisis in the future.

Ethical Communication

A second key factor in creating a renewing response is communicating ethically before, during, and after the crisis. Organizations that have not prepared adequately for crisis or are unethical in their business practices are going to have to account for those actions at some time. In fact, unethical actions are often the cause of a crisis. One of the key factors of a crisis is that it reveals the ethical values of the organization. Crises do not build character; they expose the character of the organization. If an organization is unethical before a crisis, those values are likely to be identified during the crisis. Organizations that institute strong, positive value positions, such as openness, honesty, responsibility, accountability, and trustworthiness, with key organizational stakeholders before a crisis happens are best able to create renewal following the crisis. Chapter 12 provides an in-depth examination of the importance of ethical communication and the opportunities associated with this crisis communication.

Prospective Versus Retrospective Vision

A third feature of a renewing response is communication focused on the future rather than the past. Theories that emphasize image or reputation emphasize a retrospective vision focused on who is responsible. Organizations that want to create a renewing response are more prospective and emphasize focusing on the future, not on the past. They learn from their mistakes, infuse their communication with bold optimism, and stress rebuilding rather than issues of blame or fault. Chapter 13 provides a detailed examination of Organizational Renewal

Theory and the importance of developing a prospective vision to communicate about crisis.

Effective Organizational Rhetoric

Managing a crisis most often involves communicating with stakeholders in order to construct and maintain perceptions of reality. Establishing renewal involves leaders motivating stakeholders to stay with the organization through the crisis, as well as rebuilding the organization better than it was before. We advocate that leaders who hope to inspire others to embrace their views of crisis as an opportunity must establish themselves as models of optimism and commitment to communicating ethically and responsibly. Effective organizational rhetoric then involves leadership with vision and a strong, positive reputation to effectively frame the crisis for stakeholders and persuade them to move beyond the event. The final chapter of this book examines communication strategies for developing sound organizational rhetoric during crisis.

Crisis Communication Theories That Describe, Explain, and Prescribe

As you can see, there is considerable research from a communication perspective on how to manage and communicate about crises and disasters. In general, theories can describe communication, explain the effectiveness or ineffectiveness of communication, and prescribe how we should communicate. The communication theories of Corporate Apologia and Image Repair Theory describe common responses to organizational crises and can be used to explain the effectiveness or ineffectiveness of those responses. The Situational Crisis Communication Theory describes, explains, and prescribes communication strategies to protect the reputations of organizations managing crises. Consistent with Situational Crisis Communication Theory, the Discourse of Renewal describes, explains, and prescribes effective responses to crisis. However, a central difference is the diminished role of threat to the reputation of the organization in the Discourse of Renewal. In many examples of renewal, issues of blame, culpability, image, or reputation never arise as dominant narratives following these types of crisis responses. What makes renewal responses so effective is they mobilize the support of stakeholders and give these groups a vision to follow in order to overcome

the crisis. A crisis response that emphasizes threat to the reputation of an organization typically lacks these qualities and often has the potential to extend the life cycle of the crisis. These organizations often suffer from what we call a *threat bias* in crisis communication.

Understanding and Defining the Threat Bias in Crisis Communication

We believe that an organization that is willing to view a crisis from a balanced perspective including both threat and opportunity has a much greater potential for recovering from a crisis. Despite this potential, we observe a persistent bias toward viewing crises solely from the perspective of threat in both theory and practice. As we mentioned at the outset of this chapter, threat is an important part of defining and understanding a crisis. However, we believe that researchers and practitioners often overemphasize and concentrate too much on the threat to an organization's reputation or image to respond effectively. What follows is a discussion of threat bias in defining effective crisis communication.

To avoid the threat bias exemplified in current crisis communication research, we suggest that crisis communicators mindfully define and examine crisis events from a more inclusive perspective. Nathan (2000a) explains the inclusive perspective we recommend:

> [I]n crisis the threat dimensions are usually seen most quickly and are then acted upon, while the potential for opportunity lies dormant. When a crisis is anticipated or when it occurs, the manager should be able to see both threat *and* opportunity features before deciding how to proceed. (p. 4)

Nathan (2000b) goes on to explain that our understanding of crisis and our crisis communication choices are inextricably linked. In fact, he suggests that focusing solely on the role of threat in crisis "promotes threat response that may, in turn, magnify and even intensify the state of [the] crisis" (Nathan, 2000b, p. 12). We argue that full consideration of both the potential threat and opportunity associated with crisis is a more appropriate and effective way to think about and communicate about crises. For this reason, we argue for mindfully reconsidering our definitions of crisis to include the perceived threat as well as the potential for opportunity emerging from the crisis.

Crises, by their nature, are threats to the survival of organizations. Certainly, no organization should hope for a crisis simply to experience

the opportunities described by the theory of renewal. Rather, crises are inherent and inevitable elements of the organizational experience. Those organizations that see crises solely as threats to their public images are likely to respond in defensive and potentially manipulative manners. This defensive posture, at best, offers one benefit—survival. We contend that a combined emphasis on the threat and opportunity of crises fosters the simultaneous benefits of survival and growth. This growth manifests itself in the organization's willingness to respond with rhetorical sensitivity, make ethical decisions, learn from the crisis, and focus on the future. As we have argued throughout this chapter, these elements exemplify a balanced approach to crisis. Applying these elements can produce an opportunity for renewal that far exceeds basic survival.

Summary

In this book, we hope to convince you that effective crisis management is a natural and essential part of the organizing process. We believe that effective crisis planning and communication can enable organizational leaders to better cope with the surprise, threat, and short response time that are a part of all crises. Although there are many types of intentional and unintentional organizational crises, there are consistent strategies that can help an organization turn a crisis situation into an opportunity for improvement. All crises involve effective communication. Resisting the threat bias and understanding the skills needed to communicate effectively is the focus of the next three chapters of the book. Understand that the lessons described in the upcoming chapters are based upon well-established research and practice in the multidisciplinary field of research in crisis communication.

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