Integrated Crisis Mapping:
Toward a Publics-Based, Emotion-Driven Conceptualization in Crisis Communication

Abstract

Extending current situation-based conceptualizations of crisis response, this paper develops a more generic and systemic approach to understanding the role of emotions in crisis situations. Taking an integrated approach, the authors propose a publics-based, emotion-driven perspective to crisis communication modeling, mapping different crisis types, and underpinning them with two continua, the organization’s involvement with the crisis issue and primary public’s coping strategy. The paper further argues that the appropriate crisis response and tools to manage a crisis should address the full range of emotions for optimal effectiveness at both strategic and tactical levels.
Toward a Publics-Based, Emotion-Driven Conceptualization in Crisis Communication

Introduction

How to shape the appropriate strategies in response to a crisis is critical for any given organization and public relations practitioners working in the field of crisis communication. Given that the goals of crisis communication, defined as the “ongoing dialogue between the organization and its publics” prior to, during, and after the crisis (Fearn-Banks, 2002, p. 2) are to restore organizational normalcy, influence public perception, and regain and repair image and reputation, strategies used should be “designed to minimize damage to the image of the organization” (p. 2). Strategies, argued Massey (2001), are “message repertoires that are designed to repair the organization’s image by influencing stakeholder perceptions” (p. 155). Ray (1999) argued that strategies establish and enact “control (at least in its appearance) in the face of high uncertainty” (p. 19). Lukaszweski (1997) argued that the strategic management of message response in crisis communication is a “fundamental communication principle” (p. 8). Designing sound strategic communications and tactics to communicate crisis so as to minimize damage to the image of the organization has been described as “management at its zenith” (Stocker, 1997, p. 203).

While most of these strategies are often characterized as direct responses to the crisis (Fink, 1986; Fearn-Banks, 2002; Pauchant & Mitroff, 1992; Henry, 2000; Ulmer, 2001; Seegar & Ulmer, 2002; Cowden & Sellnow, 2002; Harrison, 1999; Massey, 2001), Ulmer and Sellnow (2000) argued that “strategic ambiguity”, characterized by the maintenance of a simultaneous stream of responses that lends different interpretations so as to preserve privileged positions and promote unified diversity, as a viable strategic option. Ultimately, strategies used to deal with crisis, argued Ray (1999), would either be to (1) deny the crisis exists; (2) provide “partial, inaccurate, or delayed information”; or (3) maintain an open communication channels with constituents (p. 20). Still, candor and openness, where possible, is a hallmark of excellent crisis communication, argued Greer and Moreland (2003).
Current situation-based conceptualization of crisis response

Arguably, the two dominant theories on crisis strategies, Benoit’s (e.g., 1995; 1997; 2004) image repair strategies, and Coombs’ (e.g., 1995; 1998) crisis response strategies, are designed to understand what strategies are relevant to use under what circumstances. These, arguably, often stem from a situation-based response to crisis.

The image repair theory is appropriate to be used when the situation leads to a loss of face. When face is threatened, face works is used to repair image, argued Benoit & Brinson (1994). This usually occurs when the accused is believed to have committed an offensive act by its salient audience (Benoit, 2004). Face, image, and reputation are extremely important commodities, argued Benoit and Brinson (1994), because, as a society, we pride ourselves on, and value those who enact tolerance, and sensitivity, to the feelings and traditions of others (Benoit, 1999).

Coombs’ (1998) strategies are positioned according to the situation based on the organization’s locus of control. On one hand, when the organization is deemed to have strong personal control over the crisis, more accommodative strategies like full apology are recommended for use. On the other hand, when the organization has weak control over the crisis, more defensive strategies like attack and denial are recommended.

Conceptualizing emotions in crisis response

While these situation-based crisis responses serve as vital roadmaps to understand the crisis situation, and shape responses accordingly, it is argued that a more generic and systemic approach would be to shape crisis responses from an emotion-based perspective: To understand what are the emotional upheavals that the publics involved in the crisis are likely to experience so that strategies can be streamlined to address their specific needs.

Studies argued that the perception of a crisis, particularly from a given public, is not strictly a function of an environmental stimulus itself, but involves an interpretation of the stimulus (Carver, 1977). This corresponds to Jin and Cameron’s appraisal model of emotions in public relations (2003) that has been adapted from Lazarus’s (1991) work on cognitive appraisal theory of emotions.
Lazarus (1991) defined emotion as “organized cognitive-motivational-relational configurations whose status changes with changes in the person-environment relationship as this is perceived and evaluated (appraisal)” (p. 38). In a crisis, emotion that is always felt and expressed by the publics can be seen as a process, which changes and flows over time and across occasions by the sequence as anticipation, provocation, unfolding, and outcome. As the conflict between the publics and the organization develops, emotions are one of the anchors in the publics’ interpretation of what is unfolding, changing, and shaping.

Jin and Cameron (2003) proposed three key roles that emotion plays in public relations: 1) As a marker or indicator of the effectiveness of a public relations campaign, with respect to the overall persuasiveness of the press release or issue ad, the appeal of spokesperson of the organization, evaluation of particular organizational claims, and appraisals of other aspects of the public relations practice; 2) As the moderator of impact on a public’s attitude toward the organization; 3) As a key factor in organizational decision-making: In dealing with publics in crisis situations, organizational decisions are typically distinguished by several managerial persons being involved in the decision and no one person deciding, which mean to be a shared decision. When several people are involved in decision-making they form a decision-making unit (O'Shaughnessy & O'Shaughnessy, 2003). The whole process has the potential for internal conflict as well as external conflict regarding the publics.

While it is beyond the scope of our paper to examine the emotional responses of all the different layers of publics that are involved in a crisis, we propose to understand the emotional responses of the primary publics involved in the crisis, an audience which Benoit (2004) classifies as people who are directly involved in the situation. For instance, in a factory disaster, the primary publics would be the victims, the employees, and the related families and relatives.

This paper, thus, calls for, and argues that a more accurate way of shaping crisis response would be from the emotion-driven perspective of the primary publics: What are the probable emotional responses to the crisis? How are these emotions likely to vary over time? What are the likely spectra of emotions involved? What roles do individual and collective emotions play in a crisis?
To understand how emotions are featured in organizational crisis, we propose to examine the dominant emotions based on different crisis types. Since our model is primarily to enhance and advance organizational understanding of emotional responses, much of our conceptualization would stem from the organizational perspective of the publics. To do that, we attempt to examine, distill, and integrate the existing crisis framework into our conceptualization of a crisis prototype of emotion coping strategies. Second, we draw on the rich tapestry of literature on emotions from the psychological and behavioral sciences to identify what and how emotions feature in each aspect in our crisis prototype. Lastly, with the conceptual model that we have developed, we aim to come up with suggestions on how strategies can be developed to address the range of emotions in the model.

The significance of arguing for an emotion-driven approach in crisis communication are three fold: First, if effective crisis communication is managing key stakeholders and ameliorating unfounded anxieties (Ray, 1999; Plowman et al, 1995; Coombs, 1999), this conceptual approach attempts to identify the diverse and varied emotions likely to be experienced by the key stakeholders in a crisis. Second, by drawing on the rich tapestry of cross-disciplinary perspectives, we aim to provide an alternative perspective to current theories, thereby contributing further to theoretical development to an interdisciplinary field of public relations, strategic communication, crisis communication, and conflict management. Third, it is hoped that this emotion-driven perspective would have practical values to practitioners: How they can understand, with greater preciseness, and empathy, what emotional upheavals their primary publics are likely to experience so that they can shape the appropriate crisis response and tools to manage the crisis with optimal effectiveness.

**Review of Current Crisis Models**

**Current models of crisis types**

Crisis is no respecter of organizations. Fearn-Banks (2002) argued that a crisis is “a major occurrence with a potentially negative outcome affecting the organization, company, or industry, as well as its publics, products, services, or good name” (p. 2). Fink (1986) described it as an “unstable time or state of affairs in which a decisive change is impending” (p. 15). In a crisis scenario that often defies
typicality, it is, indeed, a mammoth task capturing the diversity and malleability that crisis wreak. Consequently, current conceptualizations have been, at best, varied, from myriad perspectives.

Fearn-Banks’ (2002) conceptualization has ranged from internal crises like plant closing, to external crises like strikes; from personal like suicides, to public like workplace violence; and natural like earthquakes, to phenomenal like terrorism. Others, like the Harvard Business Essentials (2004) attempt to group crisis generally according to types, for instance, accidents and natural events; health and environment disasters; technological breakdowns; economic and market forces; and rogue employees.

Further classification provided by Mitroff and Anagnos (2001) attempt to demarcate further crisis types into economic, like labor unrest; informational, like loss of confidential information; physical, like breakdown of equipment; human resource, like loss of key personnel; reputational, like damage to corporate reputation; psychopathic acts, like kidnapping; and natural disasters, like hurricanes and earthquakes. Seegar, Sellnow and Ulmer (2003) followed the same line of thought by streamlining the classification into public perception; natural disasters; product; terrorist attacks; economic; human resource; industrial; oil and chemical spills; transport; and organization’s environment. Ramu (2000) added another layer: Power politics, as a result of the interactions between the organization and the regulators. Lerbinger’s (1997) checklist of crisis types from three perspectives: crises of the physical world, like natural disasters and technology; crises of the human climate, like confrontation and malevolence; and crises of management failure, like skewed values, deception, and misconduct.

Such normative classifications are, respectfully, helpful, except that they shed little light on how such typologies enhance organizational understanding, and in turn, provide a glimpse of how an organization can respond. Pauchant and Mitroff (1992) extended theoretical understanding by distinguishing types into the extent of severity (severe to normal), and primary impact. On one end of the spectrum are technological and economic crises, with primary impact on the organization. On the other end of the spectrum are human and social crises, with primary impact on the people who staff the organization. Coombs (1995) further delineated the primary impact to the organization into internal and external control, and whether the crisis stems from an intentional or unintentional act of negligence and/or
malice on the organization’s part. Control is further operationalized between strong and weak organizational control (Coombs, 1998).

Understanding crisis types, arguably, is only useful as far as diagnosing the cause of the crisis, and finding an immediate situational strategy as remedy. A holistic approach in strategy formulation, one centered on emotions, would be based on the primary public’s emotional reaction.

**Primary Publics in a Crisis**

Publics are a “group of people who face a common issue” (Gonzalez-Herraro & Pratt, 1996, p. 84). In a crisis, the publics have been defined differently, according to their importance to resolving situation, their functional roles, and their long-term influences. Lukaszweski (1997) argued that there are four key publics that the organization must communicate with, and priorities must be made to communicate with them as soon as possible. They are: (1) Those most directly affected, the victims; (2) The employees, who may bear the brunt of the wrath from the publics; (3) Those indirectly affected like families and relatives; (4) The news media and other channels of external communication.

Dougherty (1992) preferred to examine publics in terms of their functional roles. Enabling publics, which include shareholders, board of directors and regulatory agencies, have the power and authority to control the organization’s resources. Functional publics mainly consist of the organization’s consumers. Normative publics are formed because of shared values, like political or interest groups. Diffused publics are people who are not members of a formal organization, yet, nonetheless, powerful groups. Ulmer (2001) categorized publics in terms of their long-term influences. He regarded the primary public as the community in which the organization works, and the employees. The customer and the media would be classified as a secondary public.

Our primary publics, thus, comprise the following characteristics:

- They are most affected by the crisis;
- They have shared common interests, and destiny, in seeing the crisis resolved;
- They have long-term interests, and influences, on the organization.
Range of Emotions in a Crisis

Core Relational Themes. According to Lazarus (1991), core relational theme refers to person-environment relationships that come together with personal meaning and the appraisal process. In the processing of emotion in a crisis, the key lies in the central relational harm or benefit in the relational encounters that underlies each specific kind of emotion evoked by either party’s expression and behavior. When the implications of well-being are appraised by the other party, each relationship may produce an appraisal and hence a response consistent with the theme and the emotion that flows from the expression or behavior of the other party.

Appraisal. Lazarus (1991) proposed that there are two types of appraisal: primary vs. secondary. Specifically, primary appraisal addresses whether and how an encounter or situation is relevant to one’s own well-being. Its components include goal relevance, goal congruence or incongruence, and the involvement of the party. In the processing of emotion from the public’s point of view, the central issue of the crisis is always goal relevance. Understandably, the goal relevance from the perspectives of both the public, and the organization, involved in the same crisis are likely to differ.

Secondary appraisal refers to an evaluation of one’s options and resources for coping with the situation and future prospects (Lazarus, 1991), which means whether action is required, and if so, what kind of action ought to be taken. These comprise three components: Blame or credit, coping potential, and future expectancy. In a crisis situation, blaming takes precedence over credits. The coping potential, and future expectancy, specify any given action the public or the organization might take to prevent harm, and how it manages the demands of the crisis situation, and whether the strategy is feasible, and what result is expected.

Public Responses Based on Key Emotions

Based on the above appraisal model of emotion, we propose a theoretical framework to understand the primary publics’ crisis responses, as evidenced by the predominant emotion elicited by different types of crises (See Figure 1).
In a crisis, a situation that is “unexpected, and non routine event that creates a high level of uncertainty” (Seegar, Sellnow, and Ulmer, 1998, p. 233), Lazarus (1991) argued that there are
predominantly six negative emotions (Anger, Fright, Anxiety, Guilt, Shame, and Sadness) based upon different appraisal, driven by different core relational themes. For the purposes of organizational understanding, we would argue that four of the six (anger, fright, anxiety, and sadness) are dominant emotions experienced by the publics, with guilt and shame secondary or subsumed emotions, particularly external publics, like victims, who are less subject to guilt or shame.

**Anger.** The core relational theme underlying anger is a demanding offense against “me” and “mine” (Lazarus, 1991). In crisis situation, the primary publics tend to experience anger when facing a demanding offense from certain organization against them or their well being. In an organizational context, the primary public will want to find out what the organization has been doing is relevant to them on two levels. First, the ego-involvement of the public is engaged to preserve or enhance their identity or benefit in the situation. Second, there is usually an issue of blaming. Specifically, this blame derives from the knowledge that the organization is accountable for the harmful actions and they could have been controlled or even prevented by the organization. The organization is invariably the object of blame.

As far as coping strategy development and action tendency assessment are concerned, the primary public might potentially favor attack as the strategy in facing the organization. More specifically, if future expectancy of the attack is positive, they are more likely to put the attack strategy into practice. However, anger can disappear when the defense against the organization is successful. It will continue to fester when their initial self-defense failed. At the stance and strategy level, though sometimes the public may appear cooperative, anger can be expressed indirectly in passively aggressive tactics, which the organization would well seek to detect if it wants to identify the appropriate strategies to deal with such emotional outrage.

**Fright.** The core relational theme underneath fright is facing uncertain and existential threat (Lazarus, 1991). In terms of the public’s appraisal process, they find the situation of dealing with the organization as goal relevant yet incongruent. Organization-based identity issue or ego-involvement issue might or might not be relevant in the fright. Secondly, given the nature of the crisis, the public may either blame the organization or not.
As far as coping strategy is concerned, the public is not certain about how to cope with the loss as well as how the involved organization may handle this situation. Depending on their resource and power, they may choose avoidance or escape from the crisis as a viable recourse (action tendency).

**Anxiety.** By definition, anxiety stems from the core relational theme as facing an immediate, concrete, and overwhelming danger (Lazarus, 1991). The public may feel overwhelmed by the crisis situation and look for the immediate solutions. Accordingly, the public may go through the following appraisal process: They may assess the situation as relevant but not congruent with their goal of survival. Their ego-involvement is evidenced as the effort to protect their own ego-identity against the organization whom they perceive to be the direct source of existential threat. Secondly, they might blame or not blame the organization depending on their environment assessment. Given the uncertainty of how to cope with the situation and what the organization might react, they tend to avoid and escape. Noticeably, the action tendencies of publics under fright and anxiety overlap. This may give crisis managers in the organization sufficient consolidation of resources to effectively deal with the publics under these situations.

**Sadness.** Having experienced an irrevocable loss in the core relational theme of the emotion of sadness (Lazarus, 1991). In those cases, the public suffers from tangible or intangible loss or both. Their goal of survival is threatened and this loss of any type of ego-involvement (e.g., esteem, moral values, ideal, people and their well-being, etc.) caused by uncontrollable sources may lead them no one to blame and in desperate need for relief and comfort. If they perceive the loss can be restored or compensated for, their sadness may not occur or will be associated with hope. For successful crisis management, the organization might consider creating a favorable expectation by associating their efforts with hope while disassociating the situation with hopelessness and depression. The action tendency of the public might well depend on what measures the organization may take.

**Integrating Publics’ Emotions in Crisis: Proposing a Crisis Matrix**

Since every emotion is a process, which changes and flows over time and across occasions, for ease of identification and more importantly, for organizational strategy formulation, we propose to
conceptualize these emotions, according to our crisis conceptualization, in terms of a dominant emotions in primary and secondary levels. This is, in large measure, derived from Burnett’s (1998) matrix, which had proposed to measure crisis on four levels: (1) Time pressure; (2) Degree of control; (3) Threat level; (4) Response options. Instead of measuring threat level from the organization’s perspective, to understand the emotional reaction of the publics, we propose to understand threat, based on the dominant emotion, from the perspective of the publics.

The primary level emotion is the one the public experiences at the first, or immediate, instance. The secondary level emotion is one the public experiences in subsequent instances, as time goes by, and contingent upon the organization’s responses to the crisis. The secondary level emotion may be transferred from the dominant emotion or coexisting with the primary level.

Our crisis conceptualization is one based on our analysis of the level of organizational involvement in the crisis, based on the existing categorizations of crises. This conceptualization is drawn from Fink’s (1986) concept of the “crisis forecasting” (p. 36). In it, he argued that organizations can measure its reaction to crisis based on its impact value. The impact value forecasts “how much impact” (p. 41) the crisis has on the organization. This value is derived by measuring the crisis; comparing it with other crises; and allows the crisis impact index to be moved from less impact to more impact. Consequently, organizational involvement can be examined through a scale of high involvement and low involvement.

Thus, an organizational assessment of crisis from the public’s perspective involves the appraisal of dominant emotion at two levels, as well as the opportunities for an organization to position the effective coping strategies to address the publics’ action tendency in the crisis situation. This impacts strategy formulation, strategy evaluation, and strategy implementation tasks (Burnett, 1998).

Based on the above, we have developed a crisis matrix based on two axes. On the X-axis is the publics’ coping strategy. Coping strategy refers to the dominant choice of the publics in dealing with the crisis situation: Either 1) cognitive coping – the public try to sort out a way of thinking or interpreting the meaning of the crisis with regard to their well-being, or 2) conative coping – the public try to manage the situation so as to alter a troubled relationship or to sustain a desirable one by taking actions or at least
show their tendency of action. Anchoring these two coping strategies to the axis, different primary publics in different crises may choose different coping strategy along this continuum. Therefore, this X-axis consists of cognitive and behavioral efforts to manage specific external or internal demands (and conflicts between them) that are appraised as exceeding the resources of the public.

Adapting emotion theory (Lazarus, 1991), there are two types of coping: 1) problem-focused coping – changing the actual relationship between the public and the organization via actual measures and steps, and 2) cognitive-focused coping – changing only the way in which the relationship is interpreted by the public.

As the key components of appraisal process, this involves coping strategies and action tendency. During the coping process, the publics can alter or revise their interpretations based on the exigency of the situation. For instance, an accident, which demands high involvement from the organization and necessitates a cognitive coping strategy, may begin with sadness as the primary level dominant emotion. A secondary level response might be fright, when the results are not evident or satisfactory, as they normally are, given the extenuating circumstances of the crisis.

The public’s primary appraisal refers to whether something of relevance to their well being has occurred (public’s goal relevance, goal congruence or incongruence, and the involvement of the issue). The secondary appraisals attached to different dominant emotions provide a new based to categories crises by examining whether any given action that might prevent harm, for instance, how the organization can manage the demands of the relational encounter, and whether the strategy is feasible and what result is expected.

On the Y-axis is the level of organizational involvement, ranging from high to low. In each of the quadrant are categorizations of crisis types. We conceptualize crisis types based on three criteria:

- Internal-external
- Personal-public
- Unnatural-natural
An external-public-natural crisis, like economic downturn, natural disaster, and accident, would likely call for higher level of involvement from the organization. For instance, the recent Tsunami is a disaster that no government could ever plan for. Coombs (1998) categorized these events as external locus of control and weak personal responsibility on the organization’s part. At the same time, some variations of catastrophe, involving internal-public-natural or unnatural, like labor unrest, and loss of reputation as a result of mismanagement, require high organizational involvement as well. While serious, some internal-personal-unnatural (i.e., man-made) crisis, like human resource problem involving employees, or psychopathic acts, necessitate relatively less intense organizational involvement, particularly when the organization did not cause these problems to arise.

In each of the quadrants is the dominant emotion, based on the confluence, interactions, and inter-relations of the publics’ coping strategy as well as organizational involvement.

**Operationalizations of the Crisis Matrix:**

**Organizational involvement.** High organizational involvement: Operationalized as intense, consolidated, sustained, and priority in allocation of resources to deal with the crisis.

Low organizational involvement: This does not mean cursory or no involvement. As with every crisis, organizational involvement is crucial. Here, however, the organization devotes comparatively less resources, effort, and energy to deal with the crisis, either because the organization recognizes there is little it can do, or when the organization did not cause the crisis, it is depending on external help, like a regulatory agency, to help it resolve the crisis.

**Emotions and coping strategy.** High involvement/Cognitive coping: The primary level emotion is sadness; and the secondary level emotion is fright. These are crises which give rise to emotion which primary publics can only comprehend at the cognitive level. With further comprehension based on coping strategy, these may give rise to a suppressed emotion. For instance, the immediate impact of the recent Tsunami was sadness and fright (Cumming-Bruce, 2004) even when the organizations involved were on high alert.

Low involvement/cognitive coping: Conversely, the primary level emotion is fright, especially when the primary public realizes that there is little the organization can do, or the organization is devoting
relatively less resources to the crisis. Fright may give way to sadness, a further manifestation of the helplessness of the situation.

**High involvement/Conative coping:** Anger is fueled, and abated, by the organization’s high involvement. On the immediate level, the publics may feel angry because they held the organization responsible. On the secondary level, they may feel anxious when they feel the organization is not doing enough. The conative coping strategy is driven by action tendency, the feeling that the public can, and must, something about the situation.

**Low involvement/Conative coping:** Anxiety is caused by the perception of the organization’s low involvement and possible inertia. On the immediate level, the publics may feel anxious because they felt the organization is not doing enough. This may give rise to anger, and anger may lead them to take matters in their own hands.

**Implications**

This new integrated crisis mapping approach provides new directions for crisis model building and a more precise way of shaping crisis response by considering the primary publics’ affective reactions, in terms of the emotions occurring after the crisis hits and their likelihood of transformation. Further, considering possible affective niches an organization might consider for effective crisis management is made more explicit and complete through the proposed model.

Based on our crisis matrix, future research can be done to enhance the understanding of the continuum of organizational involvement and the publics’ coping strategy by developing and testing concomitant operationalization and measurements. For the composition of the emotional spectra and the mechanism of the filtering, transferring and co-existence of primary and secondary emotions, further cross-disciplinary efforts are needed. Scenario development, protocol analysis and experimental testing are possible ways of prototype development.

Given that effective crisis communication depends on how well the key stakeholders and ameliorating unfounded anxieties are managed (Ray, 1999; Plowman et al, 1995; Coombs, 1999), this model may shed light on how to identify the diverse and varied emotions likely to be experienced by the key stakeholders in a crisis and how strategies can be developed to address the range of emotions in the
model, by focusing on the public’s cognitive coping or conative coping or mixed coping strategies. For instance, for a crisis primarily eliciting sadness among publics, it might be more effective and convincing for the organization to change the public’s understanding and interpretation of the crisis by providing cognitive support and expressing sympathy; for crisis primarily eliciting anger, the organization might considering taking actual actions to deal with the action tendency’s as well as expressing a sense of guilt (as explained by apology or making amends) to create a favorable reception from the public, which will help mitagate or reduce the publics’ negative emotions. Further, the organization should also consider expressing promises to help with the publics to restore their ideal and build up favorable future expectations, which in the long term will mitigate or reduce along with the threat faced by the public.

For public relations researchers and crisis communication professionals, we hope this integrated crisis mapping model will shed light on more systematic understanding of crisis responses. Further elaboration of the model offered here could provide guidelines and protocols for streamlining the management of a crisis that tackles the complexity of emotional dynamics while seeking optimal effectiveness at both strategic and tactic levels for all parties concerned.

References


Management Communication Quarterly, 14 (4), 590-615.