Research in Brief

Strategic communication of hope and anger: A case of Duke University's conflict management with multiple publics

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\textbf{Abstract}

This study analyzes, from a conflict perspective, 139 conflict-focused newspaper stories about the 2006 Duke University lacrosse team crisis case. Findings show that media coverage emphasized the University's expression of hope, while highlighting the various publics' expressions of anger. Duke University employed concession as its primary litigation strategy and adjustment as its primary conflict strategy to communicate with multiple publics. Duke's conflict stances were more accommodative toward internal publics than they were toward external publics.

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\section{Introduction}

Cameron, Wilcox, Reber, and Shin (2008) advocated that public relations is best defined as the strategic management of competition and conflict. They depicted conflict management experienced by PR professionals using four phases along the life cycle of a conflict: (1) proactive, (2) strategic, (3) reactive, and (4) recovery. In the reactive phase, crisis communication, conflict resolution and litigation public relations are the typical tools available to address an ongoing conflict.

In an earlier study, Fortunato (2008) summarized Duke's actions and public relations communications by focusing on how it framed its messages to favorably persuade stakeholder groups. This image restoration analysis of Duke's communications does not, however, address how Duke's multiple publics reacted to its communication response. In addition, how Duke and its publics' emotions were portrayed in the conflict remains unexamined.

This investigation examines the portrayal of conflict in the local media coverage of the Duke lacrosse case, paying special attention to the affective aspect of the conflict communication. How the local media cover a crisis or issue is important because often the national media turn to local media outlets to understand the local environment, culture and history (Martin, 1988). Specifically, analysis of the news coverage addresses: (1) the level of conflict between Duke University and its multiple internal and external publics; (2) the emotions expressed by Duke University as well as those expressed by Duke's publics; (3) Duke's litigation PR strategies for communicating with its publics; (4) the conflict strategies Duke employed; and (5) Duke's stances and their association with conflict communication strategies.
2. Method

This study employed a content analysis of stories about the Duke lacrosse scandal as covered by two local newspapers: the Herald Sun and the Raleigh News & Observer. A total of 139 Duke lacrosse conflict-specific stories were selected from 13 March 2006, when a rape was alleged to have occurred, to 12 April 2007, when the Duke lacrosse players were declared innocent of the charges.

These stories were coded for seven variables: (1) Level of Conflict: inter-organizational (conflicts between Duke and its external publics) or intra-organizational (conflicts between Duke and its internal publics); (2) Primary Public: faculty and staff, students and alumni, the lacrosse team, victim and victim’s representatives, accused perpetrators and their representatives, third-party, or local community and other; (3) Stance of Action-based Accommodation (Jin & Cameron, 2006): how Duke seemed willing to yield to the public’s demands, agree to follow what the public proposed, accept the public’s propositions, agree with the public on future action or procedure, or agree to try the solutions suggested by the public, or any combination of these, measured on a 7-point Likert-like scale; (4) Stance of Qualified-Rhetoric-Mixed Accommodation (Jin & Cameron, 2006): how Duke seemed willing to express regret or apologize to the public, collaborate with the public in order to solve the problem at hand, change its own position toward that of the public, make concessions with the public, admit wrongdoing or any combination of these, measured on a 7-point Likert-like scale; (5) Primary Litigation PR Strategy (Jin & Kelsey, 2008): the predominant litigation PR strategy taken by Duke, including justification, concession, denial, information supply, excuse, strategic avoidance, diversion, or other strategies; (6) Primary Conflict Strategy (Guerrero & La Valley, 2006): the predominant conflict strategy taken by Duke toward the primary public, including avoidance, suppression, adjustment, or total defeat; (7) Primary Emotions Expressed: the primary emotion expressed by the primary public toward Duke and by Duke toward the primary public, including anger, sadness, anxiety, fright, guilt, contempt, relief, hope, or other selected from Izard’s (1977) Differential Emotions Scale (DES) (Fredrickson, Tugade, Waugh, & Larkin, 2003). Two coders achieved an average intercoder reliability of .91 using Scott’s Pi, ranging from .70 to 1 for all coded variables.

3. Results

3.1. Levels of conflict among multiple publics

Among the 139 conflict stories, 54% were about intra-organizational conflict (n = 75) and 46% were about inter-organizational conflict (n = 64). The predominant primary publics were students and alumni (20.9%, n = 29), medical/educational/legal third-party (20.9%, n = 29), the lacrosse team (19.4%, n = 19.4), the local community and other (17.3%, n = 24).

3.2. Emotions expressed by Duke and its publics in the conflict

The primary emotion expressed by Duke toward its publics was hope (72%, n = 67) (χ² (36, N = 67) = 80.190, p < .001), which dominated its expressions toward faculty and staff (100%, n = 7), students and alumni (95.5%, n = 21), the lacrosse team (61.1%, n = 11), the alleged victim and her representatives (75.0%, n = 3), the alleged perpetrators and their representatives (60.0%, n = 6), third-parties (medical, educational and legal experts) (63.2%, n = 12), and local community (53.8%, n = 7).

Among the emotions the publics expressed toward Duke, anger predominated (43.4%, n = 36), followed by hope (28.9%, n = 24) (χ² (24, N = 24) = 37.992, p < .05); Anger was expressed by faculty and staff (50%, n = 4), students and alumni (31.6%, n = 6), the lacrosse team (16.7%, n = 2), the victim and her representatives (100%, n = 2), third-parties (59.1%, n = 13), and the local community (69.2%, n = 9). Hope was also expressed by faculty and staff (25%, n = 2), students and alumni (42.1%, n = 8), the lacrosse team (41.7%, n = 5), the accused and their representatives (42.9%, n = 3), third-parties (18.2%, n = 4), and the local community (15.4%, n = 2).

3.3. Litigation PR strategies toward primary publics

Across the multiple publics, Duke most often employed concession as its litigation PR strategy (49.6%, n = 68) (χ² (36, N = 68) = 64.087, p < .01), combining the use of individual/group disassociation, explaining how the organization acted to restore the values violated by the crisis, being candid or admitting the problem truly does exist, announcing and implementing corrective actions as soon as possible, or expressing mortification. For internal publics at an intra-organizational conflict level, accommodative strategies such as concession and information supply predominated and were mixed with somewhat defensive strategies such as justification, denial, strategic avoidance and diversion (χ² (36, N = 68) = 64.087, p < .01). For external publics at an inter-organizational conflict level, more defensive strategies such as strategic avoidance, excuse and justification were applied, combined with some accommodative strategies such as information supply and concession (χ² (36, N = 68) = 64.087, p < .01).
3.4. Conflict strategies for different primary publics

Across the multiple publics, Duke used adjustment as its main litigation strategy in the conflict (52.9%, \(n = 72\)) \(\chi^2 (12, N=72) = 31.542, p < .01\). For both internal and external publics, Duke used more active communicative responses such as adjustment, mixed with somewhat passive strategies such as suppression and avoidance.

3.5. Conflict stances with different conflict levels and strategies

In this conflict, Duke took more action-based and rhetoric-qualification-mixed accommodations when the conflict was at the intra-organizational level (\(M = 5.12, SD = 2.49\); \(M = 5.10, SD = 2.47\)) than at the inter-organizational level (\(M = 4.16, SD = 2.62\); \(M = 4.16, SD = 2.65\)) \((F = 4.75, p < .05; F = 4.43, p < .05\), respectively). Duke was most defensive in terms of action \((M = 1.57, SD = .95, p < .001)\) and rhetoric-based stances \((M = 1.73, SD = 1.20, p < .001)\) when employing the avoidance strategy, which was significantly less accommodative than the stances associated with suppression and adjustment. It seemed that an avoidance conflict strategy was associated with defensive conflict stances regarding conflict positioning and communication strategy making.

4. Discussion

Of these analyses, one of the most interesting findings relates to emotion. While Duke expressed hope, a positive and future-driven emotion, the publics showed anger toward Duke. The news coverage shows that Duke expressed the most hope toward its internal publics (faculty, staff, students and alumni). Publics that expressed the most anger toward Duke were the victim and her representatives, faculty and staff, and the local community. This raises the question as to when emotional responses should be used to accommodate a public’s emotions.

In dealing with multiple publics regarding its legal conflict, Duke used concession as its primary litigation PR strategy. It also employed individual/group disassociation, explaining how it acted to restore the values violated by the crisis, being candid or admitting the problem truly did exist, announcing and implementing swift corrective action, or expressing mortification. Unlike litigation PR, conflict strategies demonstrated Duke’s conflict positioning along the conflict resolution process. Duke took adjustment gestures as the primary strategy in handling all relevant publics, regardless of the specific litigation PR strategies.

The bottom-line implications of the findings for PR practitioners lie in the importance of strategic communication of key emotions. When publics express anger in a given conflict situation, the organization might, instead of responding in kind, consider strategically expressing and conveying hope, placing emphasis on future actions, rather than past behaviors. Concession and adjustment are also necessary moves when facing angry publics, moves found to be associated with various conflict stances, from more defensive to more accommodative. This study provides a multiple-public and integrated conflict communicative approach to the understanding of a crisis case, shedding light on how crisis managers might effectively and appropriately handle different publics to resolve conflict.

References