Contingency theory: Strategic management of conflict in public relations

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CONTINGENCY THEORY
Strategic Management of Confict in Public Relations

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Conflict is dynamic. So is strategic conflict management. Can you remember the last time you quarreled with a friend, a spouse, or a family member? How did you manage the conflict? In what manner was the conflict resolved?

Even as your thought processes begin stirring, let us throw you some other questions to help you focus your thoughts: How much did you have to give in, or how much did the other party give in to you? What made you give in, or even give up entirely? How did you deal with issues that remained in shades of gray?

While you are thinking, let us share a short story of how a conflict in public relations was managed, an illustration, perhaps, of how very often in conflicts we intuitively engage in a dynamic, and possibly concomitant process of arguing for and advancing our agendas on the one hand, while giving in and accommodating on the other hand. What course we take depends on many contingent factors.

Now here's the story. By all measures, C. Richard Yarbrough is a consummate, experienced, top-class public relations professional. As the managing director of communications of the Atlanta Committee for the Olympic Games (ACOG), Yarbrough knew all too well what it was like to be confronted with conflicts—even before the world descended on Atlanta, the venue of the 1996 Olympics, and the customary lighting of the torch to signal the start of the Games.

Management of conflicts was part of a day's job for Yarbrough, and among the myriad conflicts Yarbrough was confronted with, long before the Olympics began, was one involving a powerful newspaper that was concerned about possible financial excesses in the ACOG. The premier newspaper in Atlanta, the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* (AJC), demanded full disclosure of salaries in the

ACOG team. Yarbrough had all along maintained that such highly sensitive and private information should not enter the public domain. This would create unnec-essary jealousy in the unified team he was trying to foster and revelation could cause unhappiness among sponsors. With the help of the ACOG lawyers, he successfully negotiated with AJC that such information should forever remain confidential. In doing so, you could say that he was pushing his agenda here, arguing and advocating for what he believed.

Events beyond his control soon took a turn that caused Yarbrough to change his mind. Subsequent changes approved by the International Olympic Committee (IOC) mandated changes to be similarly made at ACOG, and that included disclo-sures of titles and salaries. Yarbrough was caught in a dilemma: How should he deal with an issue for which he had so strongly advocated?

He soon realized his hands were tied: He had to give in. He finally agreed to release details of the salaries—but only with the ACOG board's approval. The ACOG board was understandably concerned about the impact of its decision. At the same time, the AJC was adamant that such disclosures should be published sooner rather than later, and had even threatened to sue. To exacerbate matters, it had added ammunition in the form of support from the state's attorney general. AJC was determined to press relentlessly for the executive salary figures. The situation deteriorated to a stage where the ACOG–AJC relations became untenable, a pub-lic relations disaster for the ACOG, which was tasked with showcasing the best of Atlanta to the rest of the world through the media, and where it was so crucial to have the media as an ally rather than an adversary.

To strategically manage the conflict, Yarbrough knew he had to change his stance to reflect prevailing conditions. He had to assume a different stance with his different stakeholders. With the ACOG board, he moved from a position of advo-cating against the disclosure of salaries to one of accommodation—by threatening to resign if the ACOG board did not agree to release top salary figures to the news-paper. With AJC, he moved from a position of advocacy against the disclosure to one of accommodation, finally coming full circle to advocacy by setting boundaries of what he would and would not release. He insisted on terms for what the news-paper could and could not do with the information.

When the standoff was finally resolved, the media hailed this as "a turning point" in ACOG's "search for its own character," which it found by demonstrating the "very best of moral, ethical and responsible behavior" (Budd [1995], cited in Yarbrough, Cameron, Sallot, & McWilliams, 1998, p. 49).

Yarbrough was able to negotiate the conflict because he appreciated the con-comitant, tangential, and always dynamic application of different stances: when to negotiate and when to confront; when to allow the dispute to escalate, and when to contain it; when to advocate, when to accommodate—all paramount chal-lenges of high-level public relations. Yarborough did not enroll in a business class to learn this. It came naturally, just as it would to any of us with a lifetime of expe-rience in public relations, experience in managing competition and conflict on behalf of our own organization. This management of competition and conflict is the crux of Glen T. Cameron's contingency theory (see below) and arguably the essence of what we do in public relations.

Certainly, life would be simpler if management of conflicts could be reduced to a formulaic principle where we always strive for a "win-win" communication. can often arrive at win-win outcomes, but we have to realize the road that there is often littered with footprints of pushing our agendas and giving in to other people's agendas, with the position we take at any given point in time subjected to a confluence of factors that bear enormous weight on the decisions we make.

Conflict is dynamic—so is strategic management of conflict in public relations. This dynamism makes the field an exciting, but challenging, profession at the center of modern life and ever present in the news media that bathe our modern life with print, audio, and video stories derived from public relations efforts. Even as you are thinking about your own experiences in managing conflicts, allow us to present a theory that we have systematically and empirically tested to provide a framework for conflicts to be managed strategically using public relations tools.

THE STANCE WE TAKE IS INFLUENCED BY THE SITUATION WE ARE IN

Professor Glen T. Cameron from the Missouri School of Journalism offers a theory to understand how the inevitable competition and conflicts that occur in a complex world can be managed. A diametric theoretical perspective from the normative position taken in excellence theory (see the original excellence study in J. Grunig, 1992), the contingency theory offers a perspective to examine how one party relates to another through the enactment of a given stance toward the other party at a given point in time; how those stances change, sometimes almost instantaneously; and what influences the change in stance (Cancel, Cameron, Sallot, & Mitrook, 1997). Cameron's contingency theory argues for a realistic and useful model of how strategic public relations is practiced as a consequence of the organization's stance.

This stance can be measured and placed along a continuum, with advocacy at one extreme and accommodation at the other. Most of the time, organizations do not remain at the extreme poles while arguing for their own interests exclusively (pure advocacy) or making concessions to the other party exclusively (pure accommodation). Most organizations fall somewhere in between and, over time, their position usually moves along the continuum. At the same time, each public that an organization identifies will also be determining its stance toward others, changing in response to conditions.

Between the two ends are a wide range of operational stances that entail "different degrees of advocacy and accommodation" (Cancel, Cameron, Sallot, & Mitrook, 1997, p. 37). Along this continuum, the theory argues that any of the eighty-seven factors (see Appendix A) derived from public relations literature, excellence theory, observations, and grounded theory (Cameron, 1997), can affect the location of an organization on that continuum "*at a given time* regarding *a given public*" (Cancel, Mitrook, & Cameron, 1999, p. 172; Yarbrough, Cameron, Sallot, & McWilliams, 1998, p. 40).

The theory seeks to understand the dynamics, within and without the organi-

zation, that affect an accommodative stance. By understanding these dynamics, the contingency theory specifies and elaborates on the conditions, factors, and forces that undergird such a stance, along a continuum, so that public relations needs not be viewed by artificially classifying public relations practice into only four or five models. It aims to "offer a structure for better understanding of the dynamics of accommodation as well as the efficacy and ethical implications of accommodation in public relations practice" (Yarbrough, Cameron, Sallot, & McWilliams, 1998, p. 41). Put simply, the stance we take is influenced by the circumstances we face.

The Circumstance—"It Depends"

Under the overarching "It Depends" philosophy, Cameron and his colleagues developed the contingency theory of accommodation by using a continuum from pure advocacy to pure accommodation to represent the stance movement of an organization toward a given public at a given time and in a given situation. Therefore, contingency theory is focused on the stance of the organization in dealing with a given public, not the outcomes of a public relations practice. The stance of the organization taken at a given time is found to be influenced by different factors. Cameron and his colleagues initially identified a matrix of contingent factors (see Appendix A) that were grouped into internal variables related to the characteristics of the organization and external variables regarding the environment and the characteristics of the publics. Other factors, such as CEO stock options and grassroots Internet activism, have been proffered by researchers or professionals in public relations.

Cameron takes the position that this welter of factors is not only a realistic portrayal of how complicated and sophisticated public relations practice is, but that any good theory in the twenty-first century should reflect the complexity of natural phenomena. He argues that, like our colleagues in the so-called hard sciences such as biochemistry or medicine, we should embrace complexity. Whether in the understanding of cancer or the more complex understanding of the management of conflict in public arenas, answers depend on multiple factors. Just as biomedical understanding, for example, is not a matter of one or two factors, social phenomena are similarly complex and multifactored.

The contingency variables are categorized into predisposing and situational factors: Predisposing factors include the characteristics of the dominant coalition, public relations' access to top management, organizational size and culture, and so forth. Situational factors include the characteristics of the external public, perceived urgency and threat, and the feasibility of accommodation. Predisposing variables determine the stance of an organization before it goes into a situation dealing with a given public, while the combination and variability of situational factors may shift the stance of the organization over time, depending on whether the situational factors are powerful enough to change the predisposition to a particular stance on the continuum.

One key argument of contingency theory is the disentanglement of stance from the cluster of strategies and tactics that follow from a given stance. Stance drives strategy and tactics in public relations, but is not synonymous with a style of

communication. For example, an organization may decide to be munificent toward a public, using one-way communication to announce a new health plan for workers. One-way communication may be typically associated with manipulation or propagandizing, but in this instance offers information of benefit to a key public.

Another key contribution of the contingency theory is the proposition that it is not only acceptable to advocate aggressively in some cases for one's organization, but it may also be the only legal or ethical course to take. To understand why symmetrical or accommodative stances cannot be taken in some situations, Cameron, Cropp, and Reber (2001) conducted research on several key variables, which they call proscriptive factors. These are factors that prevent an organization from collaborating or communicating with a public. Bearing in mind that each public is also an organization that is determining its stance toward others, the proscription is sometimes mutual. For example, two companies operating in a regulated industry such as electrical power generation may not be allowed to communicate. Similarly, the moral conviction of an organization may preclude it from accommodative overtures. A religious group that opposes abortion may find it morally impossible to negotiate or collaborate with a pro-choice group. And an organization that identifies two publics who are diametrically opposed cannot make genuine accommodation of one public without by definition taking an adversarial stance toward the other. A zoning commission cannot accommodate both those opposing a Wal-Mart location and the Wal-Mart team seeking approval.

Cameron, Cropp, and Reber (2001) noted that often one hears platitudes about how an organization is willing to practice accommodative public relations by reaching out to a public. They argue that often these statements belie actual practice when these proscriptive factors preclude an organization to accommodate or even communicate with a public. It is concluded that for those situations, even though at the surface an organization seems to take an excellence approach, their stance swiftly changes and moves on the continuum of accommodation toward advocacy.

Given its nature and major application, contingency theory is a positive theory, which describes when and how different types of public relations are practiced, providing a more realistic view of the profession and the "It Depends" reality of PR practitioners' decision-making processes. Contingency theory takes a dynamic view of the continuum from the very beginning, in which the organization's stance is influenced by both predisposing and situational factors. In light of effectiveness and ethics, Cameron and his colleagues propose that true excellence lies in picking the most appropriate stance on the continuum at a given time toward a given public.

PILLARS OF CONTINGENCY THEORY—DYNAMISM AND REALISM

Dynamism in Conflict Management

Contingency theory takes the strategic communication management perspective, emphasizing the importance of managing the communication between an

organization and its publics by using different strategies at different times. It also highlights the role of power control of dominant coalition in the public relations decision-making process with its characteristics, schema, and fear of threats. Both internal and external factors are identified as influencers of the public relations practice.

Recent studies using contingency theories have demonstrated its applications in the field of high-profile conflict resolution, health-related crisis communication, and the source-reporter relationship, to name a few. Shin, Cheng, Jin, and Cameron (2005) conducted content analyses of news coverage for high profile conflicts that provide a natural history of the use of the contingency theory in public relations. The content analysis tracked the changing stances of organizations moving on the continuum from pure advocacy to pure accommodation, in response to a number of contingent factors that can just as readily move an organization toward accommodation as it did toward advocacy. By integrating conflict resolution models from the conflict literature with the contingency theory in public relations, the research results confirmed that strategies as well as stances of an organization and its public change over time. Both parties in each conflict demonstrated overall advocacy and employed a contending strategy predominantly during the conflict management process responding to perceived threats.

Using content analyses of severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) news coverage in Singapore and China, Jin, Pang, and Cameron's series of studies (2004, 2006), and Pang, Jin, and Cameron (2004) integrated crisis communication strategies and contingency theory to identify the influential factors or conditions determining the stances and strategies of an organization toward multiple publics. The health-crisis related conflict studies examined how crisis was communicated at the macro levels by the two governments, what stances were taken, and what strategies were used to manage strategic publics. Findings showed that although both Singapore and China share similar cultures and media systems, and perceived the crisis similarly in terms of severity and attribution, the dominant factors and motivations influencing each of their stances and strategies between advocacy and accommodation were different. Singapore, perceiving SARS as threatening to its political and social fabric, was more internally motivated, and hence more advocating. China, anxious to downplay the pressure from its international detractors, was externally motivated, hence more accommodating. The differentiation of culture and political circumstance were accentuated in an examination of comparative approaches like this, highlighting the critical role culture plays in studies involving the government as the organization, as well as between governments in international public relations.

Shin and Cameron (2004) surveyed 641 public relations practitioners and journalists about their perceived conflict between the two professions. They found that the perceived conflict can be best illuminated by a bilevel of perceptual differences among agreement, congruency, and accuracy regarding the professional orientation of public relations practitioners and journalists. While the two professions demonstrated their perceptual discrepancies in terms of roles, values, independence, dyadic adjustment, and attitudes in conflict, both also revealed a tendency to escalate or minimize the conflict to strategically manage the degree of

conflict in the interests of their own profession. Public relations practitioners sought to accommodate journalists, while journalists maintained professionalism by tending to the more adversarial.

Contingency theory has been applied to international settings as well. Choi and Cameron (2005) examined strategic conflict management in the Korean context to assess whether the two-way symmetrical model of public relations propounded in the excellence theory had universal or transcendent application across cultures. Results suggested that the way conflict and strategic communication were managed depended on many factors. This work resonated with a program of contingency research conducted by Zhang and Cameron (Zhang & Cameron, 2003; Zhang, Qiu, & Cameron, 2004) that merged international studies, diplomacy research, and public relations. Findings suggest that multinational companies and countries manage conflict strategically, moving in response to factors along the contingency continuum. Called public diplomacy, the application of contingency theory and a better understanding of the role of public relations offers promise for more effective and constructive solutions to global competition and conflict.

Realism in Litigation Public Relations

Using contingency theory, Reber, Cropp, and Cameron (2001) analyzed the long considered adversarial relationships between public relations practitioners and lawyers via Q methodology and depth interviews. Subjective attitudes were measured regarding strategies in dealing with the public in times of organizational crisis and how the individuals viewed their professional counterparts. It was found that lawyers more accurately projected the public relations response than vice versa. Relationships seem to be all-important and the proverbial law-public relations conflict may have taken on nearly mythic proportions. In actuality, it appears that legal and public relations teams very often work together to establish favorable antecedent conditions for both litigation and for quite frequent negotiation of differences with publics.

Reber, Cropp, and Cameron (2003) further applied the contingency theory of accommodation to advance the role of public relations beyond its publicity and media-relations roots to a crucial place in conflict management. Proscriptive variables (e.g., legal factors, regulatory agencies) further add parsimony to the theory by establishing ground rules that affect a stance toward a public at a given time. A case study out of an in-depth analysis of Norfolk Southern's hostile takeover of Conrail (Reber, Cropp, & Cameron, 2003) illustrates the dynamism of conflict management in public relations as well as the proscriptions on how an organization handles conflicts.

In advancing the theory in the field of litigation public relations, Cameron and his colleagues have identified a matrix of variables that might affect an organization's stance toward an individual public. Research evidence shows that contingency theory offers a richly complex and realistic portrayal of changing public relations activity along a continuum from pure advocacy to pure accommodation of a given public at a given time.

Expansion: Emotions and Threat Appraisal

Jin and Cameron (2004) called for attention to the role of emotions as central to public-relations theory building. Using an adapted appraisal model of emotion in public relations, crucial dimensions were added to Cameron's contingency theory that take into account emotional tone, weight, and temperature with regard to contingency factors (see Figure 9.1). An emotion-laden contingency model is presented on a multidimensional plane (see Figure 9.2), proposing that for a given public at a given time in a given public relations encounter, and across external and internal contingent factors, the public's emotional tone, temperature, and weight regarding encounter-related contingency factors will have strong effects on the public's stance toward the organization on the accommodation continuum.

The role of threat assessment—closely related to the new focus on the role of affective factors in the public relations decision-making process regarding the stance of an organization—the conceptual framework of threat assessment was introduced into the theory. Threats, both internal and external as identified in the original contingency factor matrix, have been commonly used to describe the state that a nation, organization, or individual endures during a crisis. Jin, Pang, and Cameron
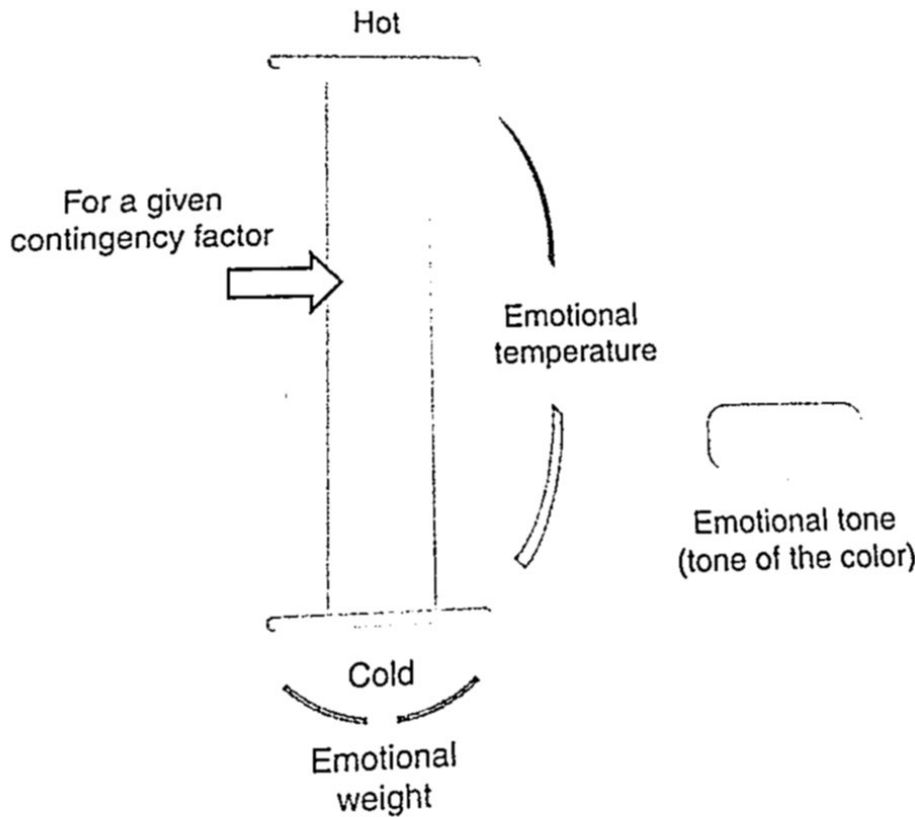

FIGURE 9.1 Emotional tone, weight, and temperature with regard to contingency factors

FIGURE 9.2   Emotional-laden contingency model presented on a multidimensional plane

(2005) conceptually differentiated threats from "risk," "fear," and "conflict," which are the cause and the effect of crisis. They proposed the explication of the concept by expanding, cross-fertilizing, and integrating ideas from an interdisciplinary review of literature and enumerated the dimensionality of threats (see Figure 9.3). A threat appraisal model within the contingency theory framework is based on the cognitive, affective, and conative levels of threats (see Figure 9.4).

Two empirical trials were conducted to test this threat appraisal model. Pang, Jin, and Cameron (2006) adapted this model to examine the fabric and faces of threat on an ongoing issue and to see how it can be communicated. The issuance of terror alerts by the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) was analyzed in terms of how the terrorism-related threat was appraised by the DHS, and the con-

FIGURE 9.3 Interdisciplinary view

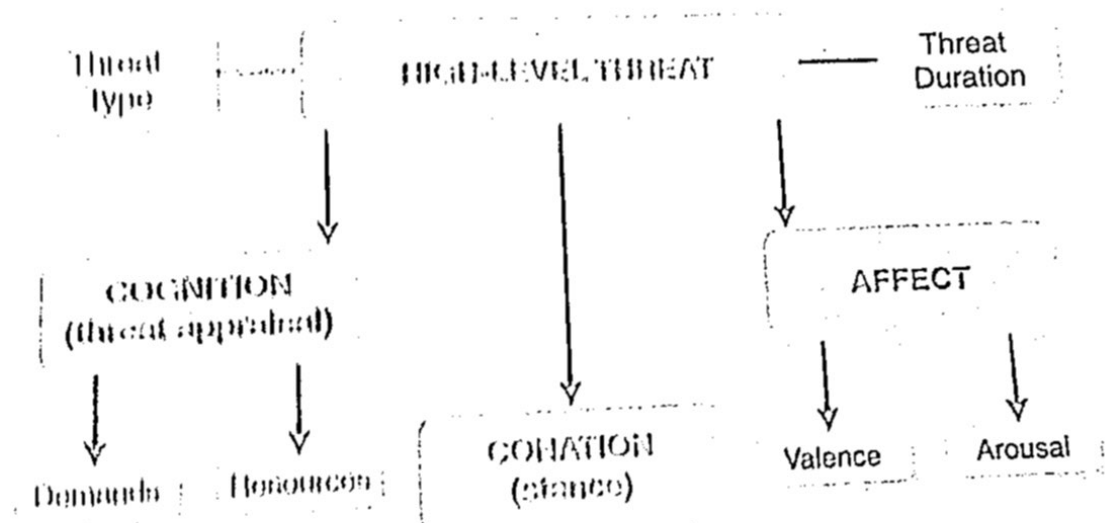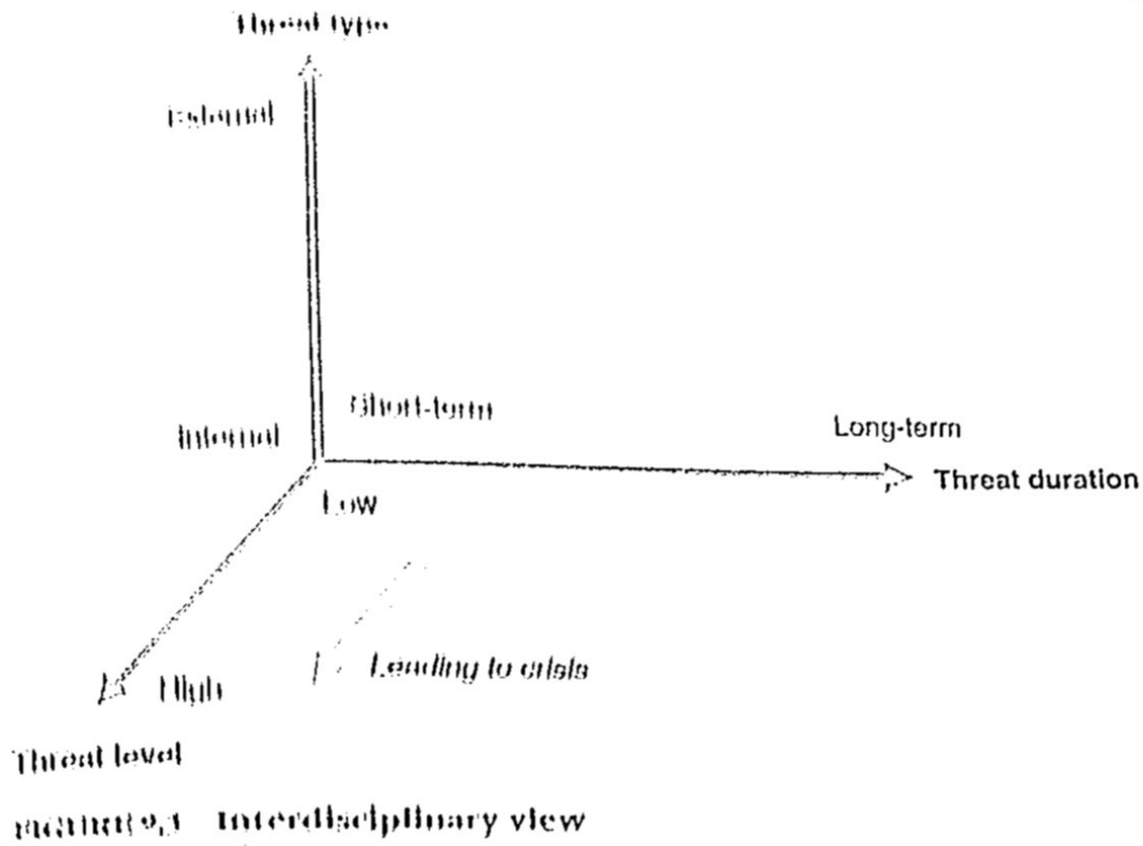

FIGURE 9.4 Threat appraisal model based on cognitive, affective, and conative levels of threats

servative and liberal audiences. Findings showed a shared view by the DHS and the conservative audiences, while the liberal audiences thought otherwise. Though there appeared to be consensus in threat communication, more internal consistency within the DHS is needed to optimize its effectiveness.

Jin (2005) conducted an online experiment on the effects of threat type and threat duration on public relations professionals' cognitive appraisal of threats, affective responses to threats, and the stances taken in threat-embedded crisis situations. Using a 2 (external versus internal threat type) x 2 (long-term versus short-term threat duration) within-subjects design, 116 public relations professionals were exposed to four crisis situation scenarios. Research findings revealed the main effects of threat type on threat appraisal, emotional arousal, and qualified, rhetoric-mixed accommodations, and the main effects of threat duration across all threat consequences. Interactions of these two threat dimensions revealed that external and long-term threat combination led to higher situational demands appraisal and more intensive emotional arousal. This study further examined the relationship between cognitive appraisal, affective responses, and stances as key aspects of threat consequences. High cognition and stronger affect regarding threats were found to be related to more accommodating stances.

These recent advances in contingency theory and its applications shed light on the feasibility and the imperative of integrating cognition, emotion, and conation in public relations research, and provided insights for public relations professionals on how to apply the theory to their daily strategic conflict management practice.

Extension: Conflict Positioning in Crisis Communication

Cameron introduced the term conflict positioning, which he defined as positioning the organization "favorably in anticipation of conflicts" (Wilcox & Cameron, 2006, p. 244). This, he argued, is the culmination of sound precrisis preparations, such as environmental scanning, issues tracking, issues management, and formulation of crisis plans, among the recommended measures organizations should engage in before crises erupt.

Taking this concept further, Pang (2006) argues that the key in organizational strategic thinking is to position itself favorably in anticipation of crisis. Practitioners must understand what factors are critical in determining an organization's position, or what Pang calls conflict stance.

The organization's conflict stance, or sometimes multiple stances for multiple publics, which encapsulates organizational assessment of threat, would in turn influence its crisis response strategies during the crisis, leading to outcomes that match what the organization had prepared for in the first place. For instance, if a standing rule in an organization's dominant coalition is to forbid communication with its publics, the conflict stance assumed would be one marked by obstinacy and dogged resistance, or advocacy, as described in contingency theory. The strategies the organization is most likely to employ during the crisis might be denial of, or evading of, responsibility. On the contrary, if an organization is predisposed to a more accommodative stance of engaging them with the aim of working through the crisis with the publics, it is most likely to employ accommodative strategies, like corrective action, to communicate during the crisis.

Favorable positioning in a crisis thus involves first understanding what factors, within and without the organization, play critical roles in the organization's ability to handle the crisis; second, based on the influence of these factors, what stance the

organization is likely to adopt; and third, what strategies are likely to be used based on the stance. Knowing the conditions (factors) that facilitate its reaction (stance) that influence its action (strategies) enables the organization to understand what causes the effects of its actions. Therefore, a major premise is that crisis factors lead to conflict stance, which leads to response strategy selection.

Through an extensive literature review, drawn from a tapestry of literature from interdisciplinary fields, Pang (2006) has identified five key factors that influence organizational stance: involvement of the dominant coalition in a crisis; influence and autonomy of public relations in the crisis; influence and role of legal practitioners in the crisis; importance of publics to the organization during the crisis; and the organization's perception of threat in the crisis.

In conflict positioning, Pang (2006) argues for a plausible integration of contingency theory's stance perspectives with image repair theory's strategy analyses on a continuum. Pang (2006) argues that both these theories are complementary and supplementary in that contingency theory is based on analyzing an organization's stance before it enters into communication, while image repair theory is based on analyzing an organization's strategies as it enters into communication. As with contingency theory, image repair strategies can also be conceptualized as existing on a continuum. Since the offensiveness of an error and responsibility of the error might be regarded as "existing on a continuum" (Benoit, 2004, p. 265), message options can similarly be argued to exist on a continuum. Image repair theory's five general strategies—denial, evading responsibility, reducing offensiveness, corrective action, and mortification—can be seen as existing on a continuum, with denial sharing similar characteristics as advocacy (i.e., insisting on one's right and point of view), and mortification sharing similar characteristics as accommodation (i.e., giving in).

CONFLICT POSITIONING: INTEGRATING CONTINGENCY STANCE WITH IMAGE REPAIR STRATEGIES

With advocacy and accommodation set as opposite poles on a continuum, contingency theory advocates analyzing stance before an organization enters into communication. Likewise, with denial and mortification set as opposite poles on a continuum, image repair theory advocates analyzing strategies as an organization enters into communication.

Based on the factor-stance-strategy conceptualization, for instance, if the dominant coalition (factor) is predisposed to communication with the publics during a crisis, it is likely to adopt a more accommodative approach (stance), and the strategies the organization uses are likely to be reducing offensiveness, corrective action, and mortification. On the contrary, if the dominant coalition (factor) is bounded by moral, legal, regulatory, and jurisdictional constraints, it is likely to adopt a less accommodative approach (stance), and the strategies it is likely to employ are less accommodative, such as denial and evading responsibility.

In proposing this conflict-positioning conceptualization based on factor-stance strategy, Pang (2006) argues that three assumptions are critical. First, the stance an organization takes is based on factors that affect this stance. Second, the stance the

organization takes will affect the strategies it employs. Changes in stance will, concomitantly, affect changes in strategies. Third, the stance will be consonant with strategies. An asynchronized, wildly differential stance from strategy is argued to jeopardize an organization's position during a crisis.

NEW FRONTIERS FOR CONTINGENCY THEORY

Measurement of Contingent Factors

The matrix of contingent factors, an essential component of contingency theory, provide a systematic spectrum of understanding the dynamics and stance movement in public relations practices and decision-making processes. Shin, Cameron, and Cropp (2002) conducted a national survey of public relations practitioners on the perceived importance of contingent factors and the influence in their daily public relations practice. Practitioners agreed that contingency theory did reflect their practice reality, and organization-related characteristics were found to be most influential.

Reber and Cameron (2003) developed a scale to measure some key dimensions of contingent factors to accord the theory some modicum of parsimony and applicability in daily practice. Via a survey of ninety-one top public relations practitioners, the authors quantified contingency theory by constructing scales of five theoretical constructs: external threats, external public characteristics, organizational characteristics, public relations department characteristics, and dominant coalition characteristics. Practitioners cited fear of legitimizing activist claims, credibility and commitment of an external public, and the place of public relations in the dominant coalition as contingencies impacting dialogue with contending publics. In the near future, this research will inform the development of expert systems and decision-support software to aid practitioners in assessing the internal and external communication environment as a stance for the organization is developed regarding a given public at a given time.

As more measurement and scale development research projects are executed, each identified contingent factor or cluster of factors will continue to be examined systematically. The interrelationship between contingency factors will also continue to be studied.

Further Elaboration on Stances

This chapter has emphasized the importance of stance as a key concept in understanding public relations practice. According to Cameron and his colleagues, stance moves along the continuum of accommodation, with organizations adopting a variety of stances with their publics at any given point, and these stances change, depending on the circumstances. The continuum has two poles, advocacy and accommodation, that represent the extent of willingness to make concessions or make changes within the organization on behalf of a public. One key argument of contingency theory is the disentanglement of stance from the cluster of strategies and tactics. Unlike strategies and tactics, stance is operationalized as the position

an organization takes in decision making, which is supposed to determine which strategy or tactic to employ.

However, for public relations stances, there is a lack of any multiple-item scale or inventory being developed and tested in terms of its evaluative qualities. Jin and Cameron (2006) embarked on a study developing a multiple-item scale for measuring public relations stance (see Appendix B), which meets reliability and validity standards and can be applied in public relations practice. The area of public relations and stance is wide open for further study.

CONCLUSION

Building on this foundational work, future studies on stance and its measurement might focus on the explication of the client and employer advocacy facet of the continuum, corresponding to the aspect of accommodation to publics, so as to provide a full picture of the domain of contingency from pure advocacy to pure accommodation. Having established that the stance of an organization is dynamic in response to a complex set of factors, future work on how that particular stance is enacted through public relations strategies and tactics will advance contingency theory as a more complete theory of public relations.

CASE: THE SARS CRISES

For months in 2003, the world lay under siege by a strain of virus that masqueraded as pneumonia but inflicted a far more lethal effect. By all accounts, the mystery of how the virus in the severe respiratory acute syndrome (SARS) has come to be has remained largely unsolved (Bradsher & Altman, 2003). What began as routine fever and cough in a Chinese physician, who was later identified as a supercarrier, rapidly spread to people who had cursory contacts with him, spiraling into a world-wide crisis that spanned across Asia and North America (Rosenthal, 2003).

On March 18, 2003, Singapore, a cosmopolitan city-state nestled at the tip of Malaysia, entered the annals of the World Health Organization (WHO) as a casualty of the dreaded SARS. On April 2, 2003, after months of foot-dragging and denial, China reluctantly joined Canada, Singapore, Hong Kong, and Taiwan in the SARS hit list. It soon became apparent that China and Singapore were to take different approaches to resolve the crisis. Singapore, on the one hand, adopted a transparent approach. When it was finally cleared of SARS on May 31, it was praised by WHO for its "exemplary" (Khalik & Wong, 2003, p. 1) handling of the crisis. China, on the other hand, has been blamed for escalating the crisis through its failure to curb the disease earlier and for covering up news about the rapid outbreak (Eckholm, 2003). Except for a huge sigh of relief, China did not receive the same kind of reception that Singapore did when it was declared SARS-free on June 25.

Note: This case study is excerpted from the article that is first published by the authors in the Journal of International Communication.

The diametrically opposite approaches adopted by the two governments presented an intriguing opportunity to study how they communicated the crisis. To analyze the two countries' approaches, content analyses of reports published in key media outlets, as evidence of enactments of informational strategies, are used. To analyze Singapore's approach, data come from the population of SARS stories from *The Straits Times*, Singapore's newspaper of record (Turnbull, 1995). To analyze China's approach, data come from the population of SARS stories from *China Daily*, China's government-run *English Daily* (Marsden, 1990) throughout the duration of the crisis.

Due to the rapidity, abruptness, and volatility of the situation brought about by SARS, and the exigency and imperativeness to manage the crisis as efficiently and effectively as possible by the respective governments, analyses of the Chinese and Singaporean stances and strategies, as well as the publics' responses, through news coverage would provide a more accurate representation of what had happened than other sources, like press releases. Martinelli and Briggs (1998) argued that in a crisis, the media become an important tool to examine an organization's stances and strategies, and the effectiveness with which it gets its messages across to its publics, rather than other means, such as government-issued press releases.

With every quick turn of events during the crisis, the governments needed to communicate speedily. Arguably there is no better way that it could have done so, in rapid succession, than through the media, particularly the respective nations' prestigious newspapers, which the government trusted (Kuo, & Ang, 2000; Lecher, 2003). As subjective as the news reports may be, we believe that prestigious newspapers, as argued by both Krippendorf (2004) and Riffe, Lacy, and Fico (1998), would project fair representations of the government's efforts, intents, stances, and strategies. Martinelli and Briggs (1998) also argued that by examining the strategies, and possibly the factors and stances, that are evident in media accounts, it can be determined how effective the organization was in getting its messages across.

Discussion

The comparison between Chinese and Singapore governments shed light on different stances and strategies different organizations employ in a given crisis and how their respective publics respond cognitively and affectively.

Organizations' Perceptions of the Crisis: Similar Perceptions, Similar Motivations. Given that both Chinese and Singapore governments perceived the severity of the crisis in a similar way, we surmise that both governments set their stances and strategies on the same baseline, which is: The SARS crisis was severe and largely internally controllable. In a common crisis where both governments were not culpable, and the locus of control was external, based on Coombs' (1998) typology, it was left to the respective governments to take responsibility instead of attributing blame to external parties. Perhaps this is a reflection of the conservative, collectivist (Schwartz, 1994) culture that Singapore and China come from. Such cultures are characterized by family security, restoration of social order, preservation of values, and national security (Schwartz, 1994, p. 102). In a scenario where the enemy was

largely unknown, and dangerous, it appears that the respective governments took over the mantle of leadership, and galvanized its peoples toward restoration. There is a famous Chinese saying that has filtered into the psyche of Singaporeans, largely made of immigrant stock from China, as well: Your fate is in your own hands.

This is also consistent with the hallmarks of the two governments: The Chinese government is centrally controlled. As Wu (2002) argued, the Chinese Communist Party relies on effective leadership, undergirded by the dual social forces of traditional values and patriotism to reconstruct a new cohesive force. In that regard, it is possible that the media, which is neo-authoritarian (Merrill, 2000), would frame the government as capable of taking the full responsibility to handle the crisis. Singapore also has a neo-authoritarian media system. More than just a reflection of media framing, the Singapore government has been known to be extremely proactive when it is confronted with threats to the country's survival, particularly political threats (Sikorski, 1996). This can be extended to biological threats as well.

Organizations' Stances and Strategies: Advocacy to Galvanize, Accommo-dation to Steer. Comparing the Chinese government's and Singapore govern-ment's stances toward their respective publics as evident in the news stories, our findings show that these two governments tend to move in a similar way. Com-pared to the Singapore government, the Chinese government, however, tended to be more accommodating when dealing with publics such as WHO, foreign coun-tries, as well as the general publics. The differences are all found to be statistically significant respectively.

A crisis, like SARS, brings about a government public relations crisis for the Chinese government at all levels. It could be conjectured that the newly empowered Chinese central leadership under President Hu Jintao realized that government public relations programs, if executed properly, could help with the management of this kind of crisis.

Taking a cautious and proactive position, the new Chinese government seemed to put substantial efforts into building constructive and cooperative rela-tionships with a variety of key publics threatened or damaged by the SARS crisis. Three reasons are proffered as to why the Chinese government found accommo-dation toward WHO, foreign countries, and its general public a better stance:

◻ China was cooperating closely with WHO, a world body, to find the antidote for the disease. When the hallmark of a relationship is that of cooperation, accom-modation almost always takes precedence over advocacy.

◻ An accommodative stance toward foreign countries and businesses is consistent with China's well-embedded policies on building optimal international relations and encouraging foreign investment to support the domestic economic development, based on political realism, and national and diplomatic interests.

◻ The government needed to steer its massive populace to follow its directions. While advocacy could galvanize its people, it is accommodation that will sway them over to its side. For a huge country like China, that would be important factor.

Compared to China, Singapore appeared to advocate more, particularly toward two publics, the quarantined public and general public. The rationale appears to be thus: The quarantined public has to be told what to do so that it does not infect the general public, and the general public has to be told what to do so that the virus is not spread. This may be due to overall decision-making abilities of the government to make crisis-time policies that required the adherence of the crucial publics.

Threat was found to be the dominant contingent factor undergirding both the countries' governments' stances. Threat, especially one as insidious as SARS, breeds fear. Fear can emerge as a dominant factor in the contingency theory. Even though threat was an underlying force affecting the organization's strategies, both countries appeared to respond differently. The most used strategy in the Chinese government's arsenal was cooperation while that of the Singapore government was attack. This could be because the new generation of Chinese government officials, characteristically younger, more energetic, better educated, and less ideology-driven, tend to back away from the use of traditional political propaganda in dealing with their publics, which paves way for a much more accommodating strategy. Singapore used a mix of strategies, ranging from cooperation with some publics, such as WHO, and attack on others, like the quarantined public. Advocating strategies like attack were softened with accommodating strategies, like cooperation.

Publics' Perception and Emotional Responses toward the Organizations: Same Perceptions, Different Motivations. The multiple publics in both countries appeared to agree with their respective governments in the perception and attribution of the crisis. There were no significant differences in the levels of emotions displayed, or the emotional temperature. One can surmise that the publics are generally supportive of the stances and strategies employed, as reflected in the media coverage. Foreign countries and businesses in China were, however, most supportive of the Chinese government's efforts, compared to the same groups in Singapore. This could be the result of the accommodative stance taken by the Chinese government in reaching out to them, or it could be the perception the Chinese government wished to project in its media after all the allegations of the initial cover-up of SARS.

Again, threats seemed to be the predominant motivation among the publics in the two countries. But that is where the similarities end. Compared to the Chinese, Singaporeans' response to the government seemed to be additionally driven by the external (namely, general political/social/cultural) environment inflicted by SARS, as well as the external public. What this may mean is that SARS was seen as an irritant that needed to be eradicated quickly because it was affecting the livelihoods and lifestyles of Singaporeans. This was reinforced by the government through the media, and because, as Hao (1996) argued, Singaporeans generally trust the government and what it tells them through the media.

Lessons from Crisis Communications: Dynamic Interaction of Contingency Theory Factors and the Emergence of Culture as a Key Factor. Based on the contingency theory and crisis literature, the stances of an organiza-

tion and its publics are not static, but rather moving from advocacy to accommodation and possibly back to advocacy. An organization may begin with a predisposing stance of advocacy, but the collective demands of the public and the situation may be "powerful enough" (Cancel, Mitrook, & Cameron, 1999, p. 191) to force the organization to assume a position of accommodation as a way to resolve the crisis.

As the Chinese government—which assumed an initial stance of obstinate advocacy by covering up the extent of damage SARS had inflicted—backpedaled to salvage the situation, it embarked on accommodative strategies to manage its varied publics aimed at regaining their trust. This, however, did not mean that the Singapore government was less accommodating. It displayed traces of advocacy as a reflection of the threat and urgency of situation. As the contingency theory addresses, threat is a powerful factor that may cause oscillation on the continuum (Cameron, Cropp, & Reber, 2001).

The stance and strategies, as a reflection of the differentiation of cultures and political circumstances, is accentuated in an examination of comparative approaches like this study, even if both the Singaporean and Chinese cultures, right down to media systems, may appear to be similar. Both governments, reflecting their cultures, conservative collectivists (Schwartz, 1994) as they are, appeared to start off on the same footing: It's a collective problem; let's solve it together, and the media can help. The Chinese government, however, needed a little more prodding from the international community before it agreed to come to terms with the crisis. That is why while one of its key motivations was to eradicate the threats, it was also driven by the approvals of its foreign publics, namely WHO and foreign countries and businesses—the international community—to help it strategize.

In a setting where the organization is the government, and comparisons are made between cultures, the role culture plays should be elevated and further elucidated. In terms of theory building in contingency theory, culture, which was not a major factor of consideration in the movement of the organization's stance in previous studies of the theory, can be incorporated as a predisposing variable.

QUESTIONS FOR APPLICATION

1. What are the elements and dynamics in strategic management of conflict?

2. How do the twin concepts of advocacy and accommodation, central tenets in contingency theory, apply in your experiences in managing conflicts strategically?

3. To what extent does relationship management, based on mutually beneficial relationships and anchored on two-way symmetrical communication, help parties resolve conflicts?

4. Besides content analyses of news reports, how else can you capture the stance movements of an organization in conflict?

5. What are the similarities and differences between stance and strategies? Should there be a contradiction between the two, how do you reconcile them?

6. What other key variables, besides those identified by contingency theory, are critical in determining an organization's stance?

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MATRIX OF CONTINGENCY FACTORS: VARIABLES THAT AFFECT AN ORGANIZATION'S RESPONSE

External variables

Threats

- Litigation
- Government regulation
- Potentially damaging publicity
- Scarring of company's reputation in the business community and in the general public
- Legitimizing activists' claims

Industry environment

- Changing (dynamic) or static
- Number of competitors/level of competition
- Richness or leanness of resources in the environment

General political/social environment/external culture

- Degree of political support of business
- Degree of social support of business

The external public (group, individual, etc.)

- Size and/or number of members
- Degree of source credibility/powerful members or connections
- Past successes or failures of groups to evoke change
- Amount of advocacy practiced by the organization
- Level of commitment/involvement of members
- Whether the group has public relations counselors
- Public's perception of group: reasonable or radical
- Level of media coverage the public has received in past
- Whether representatives of the public know or like representatives of the organization
- Whether representatives of the organization know or like representatives from the public

- Public's willingness to dilute its cause/request/claim
- Moves and countermoves
- Relative power of organization
- Relative power of public

Issue under question

- Size
- Stake
- Complexity

Internal variables

Organization characteristics

- Open or closed culture
- Dispersed widely geographically or centralized
- Level of technology the organization uses to produce its product or service
- Homogeneity or heterogeneity of officials involved
- Age of the organization/value placed on tradition
- Speed of growth in the knowledge level the organization uses
- Economic stability of the organization
- Existence or nonexistence of issues management officials or program
- Organization's past experiences with the public
- Distribution of decision-making power
- Formalization: number of roles or codes defining and limiting the job
- Stratification/hierarchy of positions
- Existence or influence of legal department
- Business exposure
- Corporate culture

Public relations department characteristics

- Number of practitioners and number of college degrees
- Type of past training: trained in PR or ex-journalists, marketing, etc.
- Location of PR department in hierarchy: independent or under marketing umbrella/experiencing encroachment of marketing/persuasive mentality
- Representation in the dominant coalition
- Experience level of PR practitioners in dealing with crisis
- General communication competency of department
- Autonomy of department
- Physical placement of department in building (near CEO and other decision makers or not)
- Staff trained in research methods
- Amount of funding available for dealing with external publics
- Amount of time allowed to use dealing with external publics

- Gender: percentage of female upper-level staff/managers
- Potential of department to practice various models of public relations

Characteristics of dominant coalition (top management)

- Political values: conservative or liberal/closed or open to change
- Management style: domineering or laid-back
- General altruism level
- Support and understanding of PR
- Frequency of external contact with publics
- Departmental perception of the organization's external environment
- Calculation of potential rewards or losses using different strategies with external publics
- Degree of line manager involvement in external affairs

Internal threats (How much is at stake in the situation?)

- Economic loss or gain from implementing various stances
- Marring of employees' or stockholders' perception of the company
- Marring of the personal reputations of the company's decision makers

Individual characteristics (public relations practitioners, domestic coalition, and line managers)

- Training in diplomacy, marketing, journalism, engineering, etc.
- Personal ethics
- Tolerance or ability to deal with uncertainty
- Comfort level with conflict or dissonance
- Comfort level with change
- Ability to recognize potential and existing problems
- Extent to openness to innovation
- Extent to which individual can grasp others' worldview
- Personality: dogmatic, authoritarian
- Communication competency
- Cognitive complexity: ability to handle complex problems
- Predisposition toward negotiations
- Predisposition toward altruism
- How individuals receive, process, and use information and influence
- Familiarity with external public or its representative
- Like external public or its representative
- Gender: female versus male

Relationship characteristics

- Level of trust between organization and external public
- Dependency of parties involved
- Ideological barriers between organization and public

STANCE (DEGREES OF ACCOMMODATION) MEASUREMENT SCALE

Given the situation, I will be _____ (1 = Completely Unwilling, 7 = Completely Willing)

AA: Action-based Accommodations:

1. To yield to the public's demands
2. To agree to follow what the public proposed
3. To accept the publics' propositions
4. To agree with the public on future action or procedure
5. To agree to try the solutions suggested by the public

QRA: Qualified-Rhetoric-mixed Accommodations:

1. To express regret or apologize to the public
2. To collaborate with the public to solve the problem at hand
3. To change my own position toward that of the public's
4. To make concessions with the public
5. To admit wrongdoing