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Crisis leadership: When should the CEO step up?

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Crisis leadership: when should the CEO step up?

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Abstract

Purpose – One explicit leadership role the chief executive officer (CEO) can play during crisis is to assume the role of being the organization's spokesperson. What remains unclear is at what point of the crisis should the CEO step up and how does that impact crisis communication? The purpose of this paper is to examine this question.

Design/methodology/approach – The meta-analysis method is used to combine different data in various studies of one topic into one comprehensive study. More than 30 crises are meta-analyzed.

Findings – The CEO needs to step up to revise earlier statements or when the integrity of the organization is questioned. Additionally, the CEO should step up at the beginning of the crisis if the crisis pertains to organizational transgression or when the crisis becomes unbearable to organizational reputation. As counter-intuitive as it may, CEOs should refrain from stepping up at the height of the crisis.

Research limitations/implications – It is an exploratory study. Some cases have lesser information to analyze than others.

Practical implications – Instructive for both corporate communications practitioners and CEOs as they have a framework to guide them on when the CEOs should step up, and when the presence of corporate communications would suffice.

Originality/value – Little has been studied to clarify the exact nature, role, and impact of the CEO as organization spokesperson in crises. This paper provides the initial template.

Keywords Leadership, Chief executives, Corporate communications

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

If there was a cardinal rule in crisis communication, it must certainly be the criticality and centrality of crisis leadership. Implicit in the leadership literature is the role of the chief executive officer (CEO) in helping the organization overcome crisis. Besides setting the direction for the organization, the CEO re-establishes confidence among stakeholders. Boin *et al.* (2005) enumerated five critical tasks the leadership, which includes the CEO, performs: sense-making of the crisis, making decisions to deal with the crisis, framing and making meaning of the crisis to stakeholders, terminating the crisis to restore normalcy to the organization, as well as steering the organization to learn from the crisis.

Additionally, one explicit role the CEO should play is to assert leadership by assuming the role of the organization's spokesperson (Englehardt *et al.*, 2004; Littlefield and Quenette, 2007; Mintzberg, 1998; Nadler, 2006; Petersen and Martin, 1996). A visible CEO (for easier referencing in this paper, we shall use the term, CEO, to refer to such persons of authority and power, including president or managing director for corporate entity or non-profit organization or heads of government) would demonstrate the importance the organization places on the crisis and dispel any notion that the organization might renege its responsibility to stakeholders (Ulmer *et al.*, 2007).

Wilson and Patterson (1987) argued that organizations should identify one key spokesperson to ensure that the organization speaks with one voice. Assigning multiple spokespersons would make image repair more diffused and ambiguous, argued Barrett (2005). While the credibility of the CEO as an organization's spokesperson is unquestioned, what remains unclear is at what point of the crisis should the CEO assume this role and how does this impact crisis communication. Central to these questions is that, given that the CEO has myriad portfolios to oversee, should the CEO step up to be the organization spokesperson at the hint of a crisis, in every crisis? To do so would arguably be an unwise use of the CEO's time. If so, what types of crises can the responsibililty of being spokesperson be relegated to corporate communications while the CEO leads from within?

This study examines the conditions in which the CEO should assume the spokesperson's role through meta-analysis of more than 30 cases that have been empirically tested in studies. These cases are, in turn, tested using image repair theory. Seeger (2002, 2006) argued that understanding the crisis situation is an important step to assess organizational response. Drawing on this insight, this study aims to explore the conditions in which the CEO should step up to be the organization's spokesperson by examining crisis types, using Diers' (2007) taxonomy of crisis types. The key research questions examined include the circumstances in which the CEO become the organization spokesperson, the strategies used, and at what point should the CEO become the organization spokesperson.

The significance of this study is threefold. First, by studying the circumstances in which the CEO should step up as organization spokesman, it is hoped that this exploratory study can provide the initial operational framework for CEOs on when they should step up. Second, this framework is concomitantly instructive for corporate communications practitioners in organizations as a secondary objective of the study is to understand the circumstances in which it would be sufficient for practitioners to step up instead of activating the CEO. Last but not least, this study clarifies the roles of CEOs in crisis. For instance, Pang (2006) argued in his conflict positioning conceptualization that if the dominant coalition, including the CEO, was involved in crisis, it may lead to the organization adopting a more accommodative stance if it was not hindered by proscriptive factors, which in turn lead to the adoption of more accommodative strategies. What was not explored in Pang's (2006) conceptualization was when the CEO should be visibly involved. This study sheds light on the degree of involvement and the specific roles and impact the CEO would have in crisis.

Literature review

Crises that the CEO will have to deal with

Ulmer *et al.* (2007, p. 7, italics in text) defined crisis as a "*specific*, *unexpected*, and *non-routine* event or series of events that create high levels of *uncertainty* and *threaten* or are perceived to threaten an organization's *high-priority* goals." Scholars have attempted to categorize the different types of crises using different measures. Pearson and Mitroff (1993), for instance, classified crisis typologies according to the crises' shared characteristics. Coombs and Holladay (2002) classified crisis typologies based on crisis response strategies. Diers' (2007) study consolidated the existing literature and classified them into three broad categories, namely:

(1) organizational transgressions;

(2) organizational events; and

(3) events/actions outside of the organization *locus* and control.

Drawing from past literature, Diers (2007) also identified 18 "types" of crisis that can be broadly categorized into the three overarching classifications.

The first broad classification is that of organizational transgressions, or crises which can be attributable to the organization, be it through intentional or unintentional actions (Diers, 2007). The second classification is that of organizational events, or crises which can possibly (but not necessarily) be in the organization's *locus* on control, and may or may not have a negative impact on the organization target audience, but nonetheless is a crisis to the organization. The last classification is that of events/actions outside of the organization *locus* of control, which refers to an event that the organization has no control over, but the resultant impact still brings about crises which the organization has to address. In this study, Diers' (2007) typology is used because it is arguably the most comprehensive classification. Examining crisis through typologies affords researchers the context to determine organizational responses (Coombs and Holladay, 1996, 2002; Diers, 2007; Hearit, 1999; Pearson and Mitroff, 1993).

Image repair theory

Understanding what communication strategies the CEO as the organization's spokesperson uses during crisis is the theoretical lens in which this study was carried out, against the backdrop of crisis typologies. The theoretical lens used here is Benoit's (1995) image repair theory. In the theory, there are five general image repair strategies, denial, evasion of responsibility, reducing offensiveness of event, corrective action, and mortification. Embedded in each of the general strategies are sub-strategies.

Denial. There are two ways by which an organization can issue a denial: simple denial, which entails denying the action for which the rhetor (individual speaker or organization) is being accused of Taylor and Caldiero (2005), and shift the blame, which entails arguing that another organization is responsible for the act (Benoit, 1997).

Evasion of responsibility. There are four ways by which an organization can evade responsibility: provocation, defeasibility, accident, and good intentions. In provocation, the rhetor claims that the issue/offensive action is merely a reaction to a previous offensive action by another organization (Brinson and Benoit, 1996). In defeasibility, the organization claims that there was a lack of information about the situation or lack of control over certain elements thereof (Benoit, 1997; Brinson and Benoit, 1996), resulting in the offensive event. In accident, the organization claims that the situation was brought about by an accident (Benoit, 1997). If the public believes that the offensive action was caused by an accident, they are more likely not to blame the organization for it, reducing the impact on the organization's image (Benoit, 1997). Last, in good intentions, an organization claims that the offensive action was initially performed with good intentions (Brinson and Benoit, 1996).

Reducing offensiveness of event. There are six ways by which organizations can attempt to reduce the offensiveness of an event. Bolstering, whereby the organization attempts to restore positive feelings towards them by reminding the public of their positive attributes and by expressing sympathy (Benoit, 1997). Minimization, whereby an organization attempts to downplay the event and make the audience perceive the event to be not as severe as it seems to be (Benoit, 1997). Differentiation, whereby an organization attempts to distinguish the event from other similar, but more offensive situations (Brinson and Benoit, 1996). Transcendence, whereby the organization attempts to place the situation in a more positive light (Benoit, 1997; Brinson and Benoit, 1996). Attack the accuser, whereby the organization attempts to reduce the credibility of the accuser and to mute their initial accusations (Benoit, 1997). Lastly, compensation, whereby the organization attempts to provide some sort of remuneration (whether financially or some other form) to the affected publics (Taylor and Caldiero, 2005).

Corrective action. When an organization is facing a crisis, they can pledge to correct the situation by restoring the state of conditions to the status quo, and committing to prevent the crisis from reoccurring (Benoit, 1997).

Mortification. The last strategy entails accepting responsibility for the offensive act, apologizing and asking for forgiveness (Benoit, 1997; Brinson and Benoit, 1996; Taylor and Caldiero, 2005).

Against this backdrop, this study examines:

RQ1. What crisis types were the case studies categorized into?

RQ2a. Under what circumstances did the CEO become the organization spokesperson?

RQ2b. What were the image repair strategies used by the CEO?

RQ2c. How successful were the strategies used?

RQ3a. At what point should the CEO become the organization spokesperson?

RQ3b. What impact does this have on the crisis?

Method

This study begins with a meta-analysis of literature on crisis communication. The meta-analysis method is useful to combine different data in various studies of one topic into one comprehensive study (Dahlel, 2003; Neill, 2006; Wimmer and Dominick, 2006). While it may be useful to survey organizations affected by crisis, the authors argue that as an exploratory study, it would begin by exploring existing case studies and identify the various elements in each crisis. Pompper (2007) argued that a review of literature specific to a field, in this case, crisis, would yield a further understanding of its development and identify future areas of research. It is through further detailed examination of these cases that this study seeks to understand the importance of the CEO in crisis communication.

Data collection

Literature review. As each crisis was unique in its own way, it was important to study as many case studies as possible to understand the various circumstances in which the organization was plunged into a crisis. The first order search criterion centered on the crisis literature. These cases were categorized into the different crisis typologies using Dier's (2007) framework. In all, 33 cases were identified. While the literature search was not restricted to any particular time frame, attention was paid to ensure that all relevant crises types in the typology had at least one case.

Wimmer and Dominick (1997) asserted that in-depth study of cases were time-tested means of evaluating business practices. Stake (1995) argued that case studies enabled researchers to understand the embedded ness and interactions these processes had with their larger contexts. Case studies, in the context of organizational studies, are in-depth studies of people, processes, and protocol (Stacks, 2002). The essence of case study is, thus, to "illuminate a set of decisions, why they were taken and how they were implemented, and to what result," argued Yin (2003, p. 12).

News articles. The second order search centered on news articles. Further excavations of the cases identified earlier were explored by diving into the news articles relating to them.

Data analysis

Analyzing context. The purpose of case studies is to empirically investigate a "contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context" and address a "situation in which the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident" (Yin, 1993, p. 59). Each case was analyzed for their intrinsic value (Stake, 1998) in detail and in their unique contexts.

Analyzing strategies. Some of the studies examined were empirical tests using image repair strategies. For the others that were not, the authors examined them by applying the image repair theory to identify the strategies used. This was especially so for news articles selected. A two-level approach was used to study the cases. The first level entailed re-visiting well-documented journal articles that used prominent crisis situations as case studies for application of image repair strategies. The second level used news articles that either furthered the understanding of the studied cases.

Journal articles with image repair strategies used as a framework provided ready resource into the insights of the thinking and strategies of the organizations at that time. For the news articles chosen, Benoit's (1995) image repair theory was used as a framework.

Findings and discussion

RQ1 examined what types of crises organizations can face while *RQ2a-RQ2c* examined the circumstances in which the CEO became the organization spokesperson and what image repair strategies have been used. These would be examined concurrently.

This section is distilled into three categories. First, situations which required the CEO to step up; second, situations when the CEO should have stepped up; and three, situations where there the CEO did not and need not step up. Throughout this section, image repair strategies used were italicized to enable easier identification and processing.

When the CEO needs to step up

Accidents (technical or human error). In May 1996, Valujet found itself in this position when its plane crashed shortly after takeoff, an accident which resulted in the deaths of

110 passengers and crew members. Englehardt *et al.* (2004) found that mislabeled oxygen canisters, which resulted in a leak and a fire, led to the accident. Civil aviation authorities (like the NSTB) and Sabretech, a contractor with Valujet, alongside family victims, were all embroiled in the crisis. Valujet engaged in shifting responsibility to Sabretech for the canister but this was met with little success (Englehardt *et al.*, 2004).

The President of Valujet, Lewis Jordon, stepped up immediately, serving as the organization's primary spokesperson at the press conference on May 11, 1996 (on the day of the crash) (Englehardt *et al.*, 2004). He utilized bolstering by empathizing with the families of the victims, and corrective action by announcing the measures they would be taking to ensure the safety of their passengers. Valujet's crisis communication efforts in this situation were largely lauded (Englehardt *et al.*, 2004).

It can be inferred that the CEO's appearance to make a statement can be seen as a good move by the organization. Accidents resulting in death or injury with which the organization is perceived to have *locus* of control (Coombs, 1995) will undoubtedly cause the publics to rally against the organization. The CEO's appearance and his statements would set the stage for how the organization would tackle the crisis.

Organizational misdeed with no injuries. In 1987, car manufacturer Chrysler was accused of disconnecting the odometers of brand new cars, allowing executives to use the car and then eventually selling these off as brand new (Holusha, 1987). CEO Lee Iacocca argued that though it was not illegal to do so, it was bad judgment and a mistake (Hearit, 1994). Intel, on the contrary, was found to have released the Pentium chip, despite knowing that it may cause calculation errors. CEO Andrew Grove initially issued a statement in an online IT community to try to minimize the accusation saying that the error could only occur once in 27,000 years of use (Hearit, 1999). He issued a challenge that if any user had to perform sophisticated enough calculations for the error to be significant, Intel would replace his chip. Subsequently, the error was found to occur more frequently than Intel had claimed, occurring once every 24 days (Hearit, 1999). Soon after, Grove announced that consumers could exchange their Pentium chip with a new one (Hearit, 1999).

As the transgression was clearly intentionally committed by the organization, the CEO had to come out to assure the publics that the organization was sincerely remorseful for their actions. However, by initially appearing somewhat defensive, Intel CEO Grove received much criticism. He was publicly proven wrong and that added to the severity of the situation.

Mortification, corrective action, and bolstering often characterized the strategies employed when the organization found its hand "caught in the cookie jar," to use layman parlance. Bolstering strategy that remind people of the organization's longstanding good track record and relationship with their consumers may deflect the impact of their outright apology.

Organizational misdeed with injuries. In July 1991, Dow Corning Corporation faced a crisis from the sale of its silicon-breast implants. When the FDA demanded Dow Corning to show proof of the safety of its implants, Dow Corning responded by denying. FDA continued to challenge Dow Corning and it was met with denials, minimization, attacking the accuser, and bolstering strategies (Brinson and Benoit, 1996). Later, documents revealed that Dow Corning was, indeed, aware of the risks. When new CEO Keith McKennon came on board, he immediately stepped up, and used mortification and corrective action strategies to soothe public sentiments.

The apologetic and conciliatory tone used reduced the attention by the FDA and the media considerably (Brinson and Benoit, 1996).

Here, the CEO only stepped up at the peak of the crisis, but this was not sufficient to placate the key audiences. It was only with the appointment of a new CEO who promptly engaged in a dramatic shift in response strategies, or what Pang (2006) argued to be from less accommodative set of strategies to more accommodative set of strategies, that allowed Dow Corning to gain some measure of success in image repair (Brinson and Benoit, 1996).

Workplace violence. In 1996, there was class action sexual harassment lawsuit against Mitsubishi Motors (MMMA). When the crisis erupted on April 9, MMMA presented a corporate spokesperson to manage the crisis. The organization's initial stand was a firm denial. That action resulted in the split of employees' sympathies, with some groups supporting the women who filed the class action, and some supporting the organization. In the first 15 days of the crisis, a corporate executive was the spokesperson. Later, CEO Tsuneo Ohinouye announced that MMMA would be settling the case and admitted that sexual harassment cases had been filed since the plant opened in 1986 (Pomerenke, 1998). He also announced changes in MMMA's corporate policies.

Because the organization had initially denied all the charges, the situation spiraled out of control after facts that showed otherwise emerged. Pomerenke (1998) asserted that this denial and defensiveness might have distorted the messages sent to the employees and the public. The CEO's mortification strategies and promises of corrective action alleviated the tension and allowed MMMA to settle the case and move forward.

Challenges. In November 1996, Texaco was accused of racism (Eichenwald, 1996) when a secret tape of its four top executives making racist remarks was released to the media. Texaco's chairman, Peter I. Bijur, stepped up immediately. He issued a press release, and sent letters and a video message to all employees (Brinson and Benoit, 1999). The following day, he appeared on ABC's *Nightline* to address the issue. Bijur's initial press release contained bolstering and corrective action strategies, first reiterating that Texaco did not condone racist behavior, and secondly, the promise that an investigation was underway and that appropriate action would be taken if the allegations were confirmed. During the interview on *Nightline*, Bijur employed similar strategies, reiterating the same message, and included mortification as well, by apologizing to all African-Americans, employees and citizens of the country alike. Finally, he laid the foundation to appropriately shift the blame to the few executives involved and isolate them from the rest of the organization (Brinson and Benoit, 1999). The end result was telling: Stock prices rebounded, boycotts were called off and, in a short span of time, negative press and criticisms died down (Brinson and Benoit, 1999). Bijur's image repair efforts were evaluated to be successful (Brinson and Benoit, 1999).

When the CEO should have stepped up

Illegal corporate behavior. In 2001, investment banking giant Merrill Lynch was investigated of banking fraud by New York State Attorney General, Eliot Spitzer (Hearit and Brown, 2004). Nearly a year later, the crisis reached its peak when Spitzer accused Merrill Lynch of giving "tainted" advice to clients (McGeehan, 2002b), purposely misleading brokerage clients to invest in "junk" stocks, and helping retain poorly performing companies as investment banking clients to boost their bottom line (Hearit and Brown, 2004). Soon after, the organization issued statements denying the accusations and attacked Spitzer by minimizing the evidence he presented (McGeehan, 2002c). Official statements were released via unnamed executives (McGeehan, 2002c; Morgenson, 2002).

Two weeks after Spitzer's announcement, the CEO, David Komansky, stepped up and apologized for the behavior of some of Merrill's analysts and that admitted their actions were not in accordance to their standard practices (McGeehan, 2002a). His statement could be seen as an act of mortification, and, by promising to change policies involving analysts, corrective action. In a similar case, trading organization Putnam also took some time to address the issue to their key publics. Only when its executives were charged did the CEO, Larry Lasser, apologize to its clients (Caffrey *et al.*, 2007).

In both cases, the CEO stepped up at the height of the crisis, issued the corporate apology, and subsequently left the organization. However, it is apparent that their appearances were needed to assuage its key stakeholders, clients and shareholders. Legal implications aside, when possible, it is argued that the CEO has to step up to re-establish faith in the organization. The perception of fraud hits at the very integrity of an organization and any threats to this can potentially be fatal.

Megadamage. On March 24, 1989, the Exxon-Valdez ran aground in the Prince William Sound in Alaska, spilling millions of gallons of crude oil into the ocean and causing an ecological disaster of enormous magnitude, affecting marine life, as well as the livelihood of many fishermen operating in the area (Pauly and Hutchinson, 2005). Exxon engaged heavily in shifting the blame, trying to pinpoint slow recovery efforts on the Coast Guard for their slow approval processes. They also tried to shift the blame to the captain of the ship, who was purportedly drunk at the time of the incident (Brinson and Benoit, 1999). Although Exxon did eventually engage in corrective action (spent over two billion dollars to clean up the oil spill), they did not actively publicize their efforts (Seitel, 1994). Throughout the episode, their CEO Lawrence Rawl was not actively involved in the crisis (Pauly and Hutchinson, 2005). When he did appear, he merely explained what the cleanup efforts entailed and appeared aloof and uncaring (Pauly and Hutchinson, 2005). It took Exxon's chairman a full week to issue a public statement and ten days before it apologized for its role in the crisis (Seitel, 2004).

It can be inferred that in a megadamage situation, it is imperative that the CEO step up to deliver a public statement to calm the situation. By virtue of the authority of the office, it will also portray the organization to be in control of the situation. Had Rawl appeared earlier to take responsibility, Exxon might not have faced such a damning public relations nightmare.

When the CEO did not – and need not – step up

Strikes. In the 1997 UPS strike, it initially designated its chief negotiator to be the spokesperson, but when the strike started attracting a lot of media attention, the organization started considering CEO James Kelly to step up (Miller, 1999). However, Kelly had only joined the organization seven months prior to the strike, and the organization deemed him unprepared for the media spotlight. UPS eventually designated its national spokespersons to handle the media onslaught.

It is argued that strikes are internal organizational crises that devolve into the public sphere because of the clamor by the strikers. Because of the nature of the conflict, the CEO does not need to address the general public, unless the reputation of the organization is put on the line because of smear campaigns and increased media attention. Kumar (2001) argued that media coverage of strikes were generally favorable to the organization, so the organization need not generate unnecessary attention to themselves by "washing their dirty laundry" in public.

Rumor. In 1998, Pepsi accused Coke of using intimidation to restrict competition (CNN Money, 1998), and filed an anti-trust lawsuit against them for it. Coke responded by using simple denial. The case was dismissed two years later (Winter, 2000). At the forefront was Coke's spokesperson Bill Hensel.

In cases of rumor and assuming that the rumor was baseless, it can be posited that the CEO does not need to step up to address the issue. The truth of the matter will eventually come to light, and rigorous defending on the part of a credible spokesperson would suffice. More imperative is the organization's attempt to address it early on. Letting baseless rumors fester may lead to them being entrenched as reality.

Product recall (technical or human error). In August 2007, Mattel CEO Robert Eckert immediately issued a statement following the announced recall of Mattel toys when they were found to have been made with lead paint. Eckert outlined corrective actions and apologized (Mattel, 2007), further bolstering Mattel's position.

Product recalls due to technical breakdowns do not necessarily incriminate organizations, so the appearance of the CEO is merely to create and/or strengthen a bond with their consumers and key publics. In this case, it is not necessary for CEO to address the public as long as the thrust of the image repair strategy remains directed towards bolstering their image to consumers and appropriate corrective actions are implemented.

Malevolence/product tampering. The case of the Tylenol tampering, which has become a landmark in crisis communication study (Falconi, 2007; Pauly and Hutchison, 2005; Trujillo and Toth, 1987), began in September 1982. Deaths occurred, caused by cyanide-laced Tylenol pills. CEO James Burke immediately took charge. More importantly, he availed himself to the media (Pauly and Hutchison, 2005). He protected the image of Tylenol by successfully employing simple denial and shifting the blame strategies, ensuring that the media and the publics were aware that the incidents were caused by tampering and not an inherent flaw in Tylenol's manufacturing (Pauly and Hutchison, 2005). Still, he issued a massive recall of all Tylenol capsules and introduced a new tamper proof container when they later re-released the product (Pauly and Hutchison, 2005).

Because the case of the Tylenol tampering has been found to be an act of malevolence by a third party, a corporate spokesperson, instead of the CEO, would be equally fit to speak on behalf of the organization.

Hostile takeovers/mergers and failed mergers. Reber *et al.* (2003) analyzed the hostile takeover of Conrail by Norfolk Southern Corporation in 1996. This event started in 1996 when Conrail snubbed Norfolk Southern Corporation offer and decided to work with CSX. Norfolk then mounted a legal and financial challenge to take over Conrail (Reber *et al.*, 2003). David R. Goode, CEO of Norfolk led the campaign to win the takeover bid (Reber *et al.*, 2003). The end result was that Norfolk successfully concluded its takeover of Conrail in 1997.

Although Goode's rhetoric in the media certainly supported his cause, the main factor in the success was more likely due to legislative victories in court, as well as the ability of Norfolk to put together a better financial offer to Conrail shareholders. While it would be helpful for the CEO to address the stakeholders, it is argued that a competent spokesperson with enough credibility and seniority would suffice.

Economic downturns. In 1995, AT&T announced corporate restructuring plans. Initially, the organization used simple denial when confronted about plans of massive layoffs. It later announced plans to dismiss 40,000 workers.

The media reported negatively, and this was further compounded by the revelation of CEO and Chairman Robert Allen's excessive pay package. Even though Allen did make public statements using bolstering by stating his empathy to those who were laid-off and corrective actions by revising their lay-off targets and offering voluntary buy-outs, its strategy failed because Allen's high pay package became a sore point (Christen, 2005). In this case, even when Allen did step up, it was not persuasive.

In a more recent event, Bear Stearns, one of the largest global investment banks, was acquired by J.P. Morgan at an initial US$2 per share (Wright, 2008) and later at US$10 upon re-negotiations (White, 2008). Alan Schwartz, CEO of Bear Stearns stepped up initially and used a bolstering strategy to laud the move (Wright, 2008). Jimmy Cayne, Chairman of Bear Stearns, later stepped up at the end of the crisis, to apologize to shareholders and employees as Bear Stearns exited *Wall Street* (White, 2008). It is argued that both CEO and Chairman's appearances made little impact to mitigate the situation because of the nature of the crisis.

The third research question examined at what point should the CEO become the organization spokesperson and what impact it has on the crisis. This is distilled into three categories, at the beginning of the crisis; at the height of the crisis, and when the crisis becomes unbearable.

When should the CEO step up?

At the beginning of the crisis. When the organization is perceived to have caused or have the potential of causing widespread harm to society in general (as in the case of Exxon-Valdez) or to individual members of the public through transgressions committed by its staff or machinery, it is recommended that the CEO step up immediately as the crisis begins to hit. The CEO's appearance will set the tone of engagement towards the organization's internal and external publics, lay down the organization's stance on the matter, and assuage public concerns that such incidents are viewed seriously and that the organization was doing everything it could to rectify it. Having the organization's top man face the public shows the severity at which the organization views the crisis, and their resolve to return the situation to normalcy.

Stepping up early also applies to transgressions caused by the organization that leads to a severe loss in reputation (as in the case of Merrill Lynch and Putnam). Again, although there may not be loss of life or injury, the CEO's appearance demonstrates the organization's recognition of its fault, and paves the way for further image repair.

At the height of the crisis. In instances where there is no clear accountability when the crisis presented itself, it is recommended that the CEO not appear at the onset of the crisis. This is especially true when there is a chance that the organization is liable for causing the crisis. Aside from the legal implications of their involvement, the uncertainty surrounding the issue can polarize the public even without sufficient information. Having the CEO step up and take a stand puts the organization at a greater risk of worsening the situation.

Another instance when it is recommended the CEO appear only at the height of the crisis is when the organization is forced to take a negative/unpopular stance. Even if the position is justified, warranted, and backed up by facts, it is a bitter pill best served by other authoritative spokespersons lower in rank than the CEO. Only when the negative stance has been articulated and justified does the CEO need to appear to assuage the public and soften the impact of their otherwise harsh position.

When the crisis becomes unbearable. In the event that an organization's reputation is threatened, the CEO must appear, regardless of the kind of crisis it is facing. This is because the threat to the reputation becomes of paramount importance, and the underlying circumstances that brought it up become secondary. Whatever remedies the organization will present to correct the situation will be undermined by the fact that trust in the organization is diminishing.

As the most authoritative figure in the organization, it is up to the CEO to arrest that downward spiral. He will be the most credible person to diffuse the tension brought about by the threat, and relieve pressure from the organization to prove itself, thereby allowing them to continue on with the strategies that are meant to remedy the original crisis.

Conclusion

This study has examined when the CEO should step up to be the organization spokesperson, and if so, at what point must he step up.

There appears to be two recurring trends in the meta-analysis. First, in instances where organizations have to reverse their initial stance, such as when they have to go back on their word or overturn initial claims, often made by an organization spokesperson, the CEO has to step up to give more credence to the new statement/stance. Second, when a crisis involves the integrity of an organization, the CEO has to step up in order to give the organization a strong, responsible face.

As an exploratory study, this study examined and reviewed crises that have happened. Even though attention has been paid to examine every crisis type in Dier's (2007) typology, admittedly, some crises have more prominence, hence, more information are available about them than others. In carrying out a meta-analysis, there are limitations the authors had to accept. First, the authors have not been able to examine other contributing factors in a crisis, such as the impact of the CEO's personality (i.e. whether he is media savvy, introverted, or stern) on crisis communication. Schoenberg (2005) argued for a crisis leadership model that encompasses personal attributes like integrity, intelligence, vision, courage, amongst others, that measure a leader's authenticity and in turn enables the leader to assert influence during crisis. Second, it is also not able to capture the effects of the organization's prior reputation with its publics before the crisis. Lyon and Cameron (2004), for instance, examined the organization's prior relationship with its publics and found the "halo effect" in organizations with firm reputations as "shining stars of social responsibility" (p. 231) to be usually afforded the benefit of the doubt in times of crises. In that regard, a public apology during or after the crisis would reinforce the publics' affection for the organization. Last but not least, it is not able to examine the level of enlightenment of the CEO because that would determine whether the CEO would want to step up in the first place. The level of enlightenment is one of the key measurements of the characteristics of the dominant coalition in the contingency theory (Cancel *et al.*, 1997), which has emerged to be a dominant theory in crisis and conflict management (Pang, 2006). Further research can be carried out in the future examining these gaps.

Nonetheless, the authors have taken the critical first step to set the research in this area in motion. It is hoped that this study provide a basic template that would illuminate practical insights for corporate communications practitioners on when to advise the CEO to front a crisis as spokesperson. To use military parlance, the CEO does not need to appear in every battle as long as the CEO knows how to win the war. The question this study had hoped to answer is how does the CEO know which battle to front in order to get the optimal mileage.

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