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Contingency theory of strategic conflict management: Directions for the practice of crisis communication from a decade of theory development, discovery and dialogue

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Contingency Theory of Strategic Conflict Management: Directions for the Practice of Crisis Communication from a Decade of Theory Development, Discovery, and Dialogue

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The dilemma facing crisis scholars could not be more paradoxical: How does one explain and predict the outcome of a phenomenon – characteristics which Chaffee and Berger (1987) argued to be the foundation of a theory – that is so contextual-dependent, where the twists and turns of unfolding events often frustrate the natural ebb of what one could reasonably surmise as logical trajectory? Admittedly, the *bête noire* for many in the field is that our powers of deductive reasoning, often woven from threads of foraged facts surrounding the unpredictability of crises, are often tragically compromised and encumbered by myriad complexities that one can be forgiven to consider crisis communication, which Fearn-Banks (2002) defined as "dialogue between the organization and its public prior to, during, and after the negative occurrence" (p. 9), being borne out of experience of dealing with uncertainty than erudition to capture a certain semblance of certainty. More art than science.

Without doubt, there is a science behind the finesse of crisis communication. This science has been gleaned from best practices (Seeger 2006) and the practice has been recorded in established textbooks (e.g., Coombs 2007; Fearn-Banks 2002; Ulmer, Sellnow, & Seeger 2007). While best practices, which Venette (2006) described as "strategies" that "appear" as "common-sense recommendations" (p. 230), are useful knowledge, these hold little weight if not subjected to the rigor of scholarship (Coombs 2008). More significantly, Heath (2006) argued that practice should be enhanced, entrenched, and enabled through research.

While research in crisis communication has been argued to be "most addressed" (Pauchant & Douville 1993: 56), Falkheimer and Heide (2006) argued that

the field is "dominated by non-theoretical case studies and guidelines" (p. 181). Regrettably, theory building and development have been painfully gradual (Fishman 1999; Frandsen & Johansen 2005). Yet, as communication scientists, it is our cardinal duty to continually refine a structure to help us order, explain, predict, and control the world around us, argued Chaffee and Berger (1987). "Communication scientists think and talk about theory a lot. They work toward development of the theory, and they bemoan the fact that there is not more good theory in the field" (p. 100).

Developing A New Theoretical Perspective

In crisis communication, much of the scholarship has been framed from public relations research and practice (Falkheimer & Heide 2006). Increasingly, it is regarded as a critical component of public relations (Coombs 2001; Grunig, Grunig, & Dozier 2002; Reber, Cropp, & Cameron 2003). Thus, given that much of the literature on effective public relations had been built on Grunig and Grunig's (1992) and Grunig and Hunt's (1984) excellence theory, it is never easy to question the canon of the field by developing an alternative perspective in public relations that has since evolved into a viable theoretical lens to examine conflict management which in turn informs crisis communication. The excellence theory has been argued to be normative theory (Grunig & Grunig 1992) by its much-esteemed founders and has so dominated research (Botan & Taylor 2004) that when DeFleur (1998) decried the lack of paradigmatic theoretical advances in communication, he certainly failed to address the resistance one faces in querying existing premises to make that quantum leap of a paradigmatic shift in thinking.

The contingency theory of strategic conflict management, which began questioning excellence theory's positioning of symmetrical communication as normative theory on how organizations should be practicing public relations that was regarded as the most ethical and effective (Grunig 1996), might have had its humble beginnings as an elaboration, qualification, and extension of the value of symmetry (Cameron 1997; Cameron et al. 2001). Over the last decade, however, it has come into its own, and emerged as an empirically tested perspective that argued that the complexity in strategic communication could not be reduced to excellence theory's models of excellence. Communication, argued its contingency theorists, could be examined through a continuum whereby organizations take a particular stance at a given time for a given public depending on the circumstance, instead of subscribing the practice to one model or a hybrid of two models in excellence theory. In offering a new perspective, it was by no means an attempt of contingency theorists to set up excellence theory for a "straw man argument" (Yarbrough et al. 1998: 53). Instead, its proponents argued that it was a "sense-making effort to ground a theory of accommodation in practitioner experience, to challenge certain aspects of the excellence theory" (p. 53). But without the

revolutionary ideas of excellence to shape a strategic, managerial vision for public relations and more importantly, the vision of the practitioner as far more than a hired advocate, contingency theory would not have arisen.

Against the excellence backdrop then, contingency research was, by all intents and purposes, an attempt to provide as realistic and grounded a description of how intuitive, nuanced, and textured public relations has been practiced (Cancel et al. 1999; Cameron, Pang, & Jin 2007). This paradigmatic reconfiguration might have ruffled more feathers than it was initially appreciated (Cameron 1997); nonetheless, it was a necessity borne out of a need to demonstrate the subtleties of communication management that a single model like the two-way symmetry, though argued to be "real" (Grunig & Grunig 1992: 320), was "too inflexible to be meaningful" (Yarbrough et al. 1998: 53).

For a paradigmatic theoretical shift to emerge, Kuhn (1996) suggested it must satisfy three conditions. First, it builds upon "pre-established theory" (p. 16). Second, it receives the "assent of the relevant community" (p. 94) whose "knowledge of [the] shared paradigm can be assumed" (p. 20), and this same community agrees to commit to the "same rules and standards for scientific practice" (p. 11). Third, it represents a "sign of maturity" in the development pattern of the field (p. 11). For the emerging paradigmatic thinking to take root and be accepted, Kuhn (1996) argued that the theory "must seem better than its competitors, but it need not, and in fact never does, explain all the facts with which it can be confronted" (pp. 17–18). By all measures, the contingency theory has satisfied most, if not all of Kuhn's criteria. Its genesis was in the established work of the excellence and grounded theory; and it has been systematically subjected to the same scientific rigor as any empirical research.

Theory to Inform Crisis Communication Practice

While the jury is out whether the contingency theory would be considered a paradigmatic breakthrough in due time, for now, with its decade of theory development, discovery, and dialogue, it can offer insights and directions on how crisis communication can be undertaken. It has been applied in diverse organizational, national, and international settings, on a wide range of interdisciplinary issues, like health crises, political crises, public diplomacy, crisis communications, and mergers and acquisitions. The contingency theory, which counts among its influence public relations literature, excellence theory, observations, and grounded theory, and employing multiple methodological tools, addresses the concerns raised by Falkheimer and Heide (2006), who argued that this "underdeveloped research field" ought to be "dominated by intercultural theory, quantitative empirical surveys, analyzed through established national frames and discourses" (p. 181).

The purpose of this chapter is threefold. First, to reassess and recapitulate the theory's explanatory powers in portraying a realistic understanding of how

communication is managed between the organization and its diverse publics, with the aim of distilling insights on how organizations and practitioners can review and reassess their own practice of crisis communication. Second, the theory's initial postulations of 87 factors influencing stance movements may have been more complex than imagined. This chapter aims to streamline and redefine the influence of factors into a more parsimonious form by examining which are the more pertinent factors and how they are relevant to crisis communication. This will be instructive to organizations and practitioners as they now have empirically tested straws to grasp in understanding the key dynamics that are at play during crises. Third, through the aforementioned aims, to contemplate new directions on how crisis communication can be undertaken. While organizations cannot control the occurrence and unpredictability of crises, they can determine how to respond to them (Coombs 2001) and control, to a large extent, how communication ought to be conducted. Establishing control is the basic responsibility of organizations and practitioners during crises (Coombs 2007).

This chapter, a meta-theoretical analysis based on an extensive review of literature of studies employing contingency theory, integrated with an interdisciplinary tapestry of conflict, management, and public relations literature, is divided into three sections. The first chronicles its origins, its theoretical platform, and the nascent testing and expounding of the theory. The second consolidates the theoretical development. The third encapsulates the lessons learnt and offers insights to crisis communication practice.

To constantly draw relevance on how the theory can inform the practice of crisis communication, some measure of literary license and indulgence is sought. The chapter is structured thus: at the beginning of each section, a *crisis axiom*, extracted from the best practices in crisis communication in the *Journal of Applied Communication Research*'s special issue on crisis communication in 2006, is featured. This is followed by a statement of *crisis challenge* that reflects the struggles that practitioners may have faced. The challenge is met by description and enumeration of the contingency theory and the developments made. Practical *insights* on how the discoveries made in the theory can inform the practice of crisis communication will be highlighted to sum up each section, followed by takeaway points in the form of *Crisis Lesson Points*.

Redefining Communication During Crises: The Beginnings of Contingency Theory (1997–2001)

Crises are "dynamic"

(Seeger 2006: 241)

Crisis Challenge: Why do organizations and practitioners sometimes get locked into thinking that there is only a set way(s) of communicating during crises?

Much of crisis research has been drawn from excellence theory's four models of excellence. They are:

Press agentry/publicity model: Here, the organization is only interested in making its ethos and products known, even at the expense of half-truths.

Public information model: Predominantly characterized by one-way transfer of information from the organization to the publics, the aim is to provide information in a journalistic form.

Two-way asymmetric model: Instead of a rigid transference of information, the organization uses surveys and polls to persuade the publics to accept its point of view.

Two-way symmetric model: Here, the organization is more amenable to developing a dialogue with the publics. Communication flows both ways between the organization and the public and both sides are prepared to change their stances, with the aims of resolving the crisis in a professional, ethical, and effective way.

The two-way symmetrical model has been positioned as normative theory, which stated how organizations should be practicing public relations that was regarded as the most ethical and effective manner (Grunig & Grunig 1992; Grunig 1996).

The contingency theory, however, saw a different reality. Cancel et al. (1997) argued there were several reasons why the four models of public relations were inadequate to explain the range of operational stances and strategies that could take place in public relations. Central to their arguments were three key reasons. First, the data collected had proved the theory to be "weak" (p. 37). Studies conducted to test the models' reliability had shown to be "below minimum standards of reliability" (p. 37). Second, the authors argued that the assumption of the two-way symmetrical model representing excellence in public relations was methodically flawed because research did not support it. Citing Hellweg's (1989) findings, the authors noted that evidence to demonstrate "symmetrical techniques produce asymmetrical results" was lacking (p. 39).

Third, inherent in the assumption of the two-way symmetrical model was that the organization must engage in dialogue with the public, even though the public may be morally repugnant. This included "offering trade-offs" to a morally repugnant public, an exercise that could be viewed as "unethical" (p. 38).

Public relations research also questioned the possibility and ethics of dialogue. There had been instances when the organization would not enter into any form of dialogue with the publics because they were unduly unreasonable, and unwilling to collaborate. Kelleher (2003) found that public relations could be proscribed by circumstances, such as collective bargaining. There were also limits to collaboration, argued Leichty (1997), particularly as collaboration required "two or more parties to cooperate in good faith: Collaboration is a 'relational strategy' and cannot be enacted without cooperation" (p. 55). In a recent critical analysis of symmetrical communication, Roper (2005) questioned the motive of open, collaborative negotiation and communication, and in whose interests concessions were made:

> In assessing whether an organization is exercising "excellent" public relations through a symmetrical approach to communication we also need to examine the extent of the concessions made to external stakeholders. Are they "just enough" to quiet public criticism, allowing essentially a business as usual strategy to remain in force? Are they allowing the continuing cooperation between business and government, preventing the introduction of unwelcome legislation – and at what price? (p. 83)

Stoker and Tusinski (2006) also thought that although the goals of symmetrical communication were commendable, they were unreasonable, in that symmetry may pose moral problems in public relations, and may lead to "ethically questionable quid pro quo relationships" (p. 174). Holtzhausen, Petersen, and Tindall (2003) rejected the notion of symmetry as the normative public relations approach. In their study of South African practitioners, the authors found that practitioners developed their practice that reflected a greater concern about the relationship between the organization and its publics based upon the larger economic, social, and political realities.

From communicating in models to adopting stances along a continuum

The move from the four models to a continuum began when Cameron and his colleagues found studies indicating that "unobtrusive control" (Cameron 1997: 33) might exist in the symmetrical and asymmetrical models. Hellweg (1989) had argued that symmetrical communication should be refined "along less rigorous lines of a continuum ranging from conflict to cooperation" (Cancel et al. 1997: 33). Utilizing the findings of Hellweg (1989), Murphy (1991), Dozier, Grunig, and Grunig (1995), and Cancel et al. (1997), they argued that public relations was more accurately portrayed along a continuum. "This view is a more effective and realistic illustration of public relations and organization behavior than a conceptualization of four models" (Cancel et al. 1997: 34), the authors argued. Moreover, because of the fluidity of the circumstances, which, in turn, may affect an organization's stance and strategies, a continuum would be far more grounded to reality that was able to "more accurately portray the variety of public relations stances available" (p. 34).

The continuum, argued Cancel et al. (1999), thus explained "an organization's possible wide range of stances taken toward an individual public, differing from the more proscriptive and mutually exclusive categorization" (p. 172) found in the four models.

Cameron and his colleagues took the idea of continua further, arguing for a more realistic description of how public relations was practiced. It examined how organizations practiced a variety of public relations stances at one point in time, how those stances changed, sometimes almost instantaneously, and what influenced the change in stance (Cancel et al. 1997). Their reasoning was this: because public relations, and especially conflict management and crisis

communication, was so complex and subtle, understanding it from any of the four models, particularly the two-way symmetrical model, would be far too limiting and rigid. "Effective and ethical public relations is possible at a range of points on a continuum of accommodation," argued Yarbrough et al. (1998: 53). Excellent public relations activity, including dealing with conflicts and crises, "cannot and should not be typified as a single model or even a hybrid model of practice" (Cameron et al. 2001: 245).

The organizational response to the public relations dilemma at hand, according to the contingency theory, which has, at one end of the continuum, advocacy, and at the other end, accommodation, was, thus, "It Depends." The theory offered a matrix of 87 factors (see appendix 1), arranged thematically, that the organization could draw on to determine its stance. Between advocacy, which means arguing for one's own case, and accommodation, which means giving in, was a wide range of operational stances that influenced public relations strategies and these entailed "different degrees of advocacy and accommodation" (Cancel et al. 1997: 37). Along this continuum, the theory argued that any of the 87 factors could affect the location of an organization on that continuum "*at a given time* regarding *a given public*" (Cancel et al. 1999: 172; Yarbrough et al. 1998: 40).

Pure Advocacy	Pure Accommodation

The theory sought to understand the dynamics, within and outside the organization, that could affect an organization's stance. By understanding these dynamics, it elaborated, specified the conditions, factors, and forces that undergirded such a stance, so that public relations need not be viewed by artificially classifying into boxes of behavior. It aimed to "offer a structure for better understanding the dynamics of accommodation as well as the efficacy and ethical implications of accommodation in public relations practice" (Yarbrough et al. 1998: 41).

Insight 1: If crises are, indeed, dynamic (Seeger 2006: 241), communicating during crises should be equally, if not more, dynamic. Instead of viewing communication during crises as the practice of models, with the two-way symmetrical model held as the ideal model, organizations can consider adopting stances, or positions, ranging from advocating its case to accommodating the case to its publics.

Crisis Lesson Point: By changing the view that crisis communication can be practiced as the dynamic enactment of stances along a continuum, organizations and practitioners are better placed and in greater control to determine how they can manage the crisis campaign most effectively because this will free them from being locked into a certain mode (read: boxes) of thinking. It liberates them to think out-of-the-box, and provides more leverage in crisis planning and campaign implementation.

Testing and Expounding the Contingency Theory (1998–2001)

Crisis communication is "most effective when it is part of the decision process itself."

(Seeger 2006: 236)

Crisis Challenge: How can organizations and practitioners be empowered to understand that they can rely on a framework to help them understand how their decisions impact their actions?

To test the theoretical veracity and the applicability of the theory, Cancel et al. (1999) took it to the practitioners. In wide-ranging and extensive interviews with public relations professionals, the authors sought to understand how the practitioners managed conflict and whether the theory made sense to them. "In effect, we set out to see whether 'there is anything to the contingency theory' and if so, to see how the theory can be grounded in the words, experience, and perspective of practitioners" (p. 172), the authors stated. This was done through the use of a few broad questions about when and how practitioners "reach out" to key publics.

This study broke new ground. Besides the study participants' unknowing concurrence with the nascent contingency theory's assertion that a continuum of advocacy and accommodation was a "valid representation of their interactions and their corporations' interactions with external publics" (p. 176), further insights were shed on the relative influences of the 87 factors in positing the organization's position on the continuum, spawning the contingency terms, predisposing and situational variables.

While practitioners' unsolicited views meshed with a dynamic and modulating representation of what happens in public relations, they argued that some of the 87 variables featured more prominently than others. There were factors that influenced the organization's position on the continuum *before* it interacts with a public; and there were variables that influenced the organization's position on the continuum *during* interaction with its publics. The former have been categorized as predisposing variables, while the latter, situational variables. Some of the well-supported predisposing factors Cancel et al. (1999) found included (1) the size of the organization; (2) corporate culture; (3) business exposure; (4) public relations to dominant coalition; (5) dominant coalition enlightenment; and (6) individual characteristics of key individuals, like the CEO. These factors were supported in the crisis management literature. For instance, organizational culture had been found to be a key factor in ensuring the formulation of a sound crisis plan and excellent crisis management (Marra 1998). Bechler (1995) also found that organizational culture dictated how the organization responded to crisis. Situational variables were factors that were most likely to influence how an organization related to a public by effecting shifts from a predisposed accommodative

or adversarial stance along the continuum during an interaction. Some of the supported situational factors included (1) urgency of the situation; (2) characteristics of the other public; (3) potential or obvious threats; and (4) potential costs or benefit for the organization from choosing the various stances (Cancel et al. 1999).

The classification of the factors into two categories was by no means an attempt to order the importance of one over the other in a given situation. The situational variables could determine the eventual degree of accommodation an organization takes by "effecting shifts from a predisposed accommodative or adversarial stance along the continuum during an interaction with the external public" (Yarbrough et al. 1998: 43). At the same time, an organization may not move from its predisposed stance if the situational variables are not compelling nor powerful enough to influence the position or if the opportunity costs of the situational variables do not lead to any visible benefits (Cameron et al. 2001). Consequently, both predisposing and situational factors could move the organization toward increased accommodation or advocacy. What was important in determining where the organization situates on the continuum involved the "weighing of many factors found in the theory" (Yarbrough et al. 1998: 50). Notably, the factors explain movement either way along the continuum.

While Cameron and his colleagues had, by this time, managed to explain the complexity, contextual, and even the conundrum of a dialogic process, they had yet to answer one of the central questions they posed in arguing why symmetrical communication could not be normative. The question was whether communication could still take place with a morally repugnant public. A broader casting of the question was whether other factors precluded or proscribed communication termed variously as dialogue, trade-offs, accommodation, or symmetrical communication.

That question took them to a further elaboration and explication of the theory. Cameron et al. (2001) argued that there were occasions when accommodation was not possible at all, due to moral, legal, and regulatory reasons. They labeled them as proscriptive variables. Six were identified: (1) when there was moral conviction that an accommodative or dialogic stance towards a public may be inherently unethical; (2) when there was a need to maintain moral neutrality in the face of contending publics; (3) when legal constraints curtailed accommodation; (4) when there were regulatory restraints; (5) when senior management prohibited an accommodative stance; (6) when the issue became a jurisdictional concern within the organization and resolution of the issue took on a constrained and complex process of negotiation. The proscriptive variables "did not necessarily drive increased or extreme advocacy, but did preclude compromise or even communication with a given public," argued Cameron et al. (2001: 253).

Theoretical discussions aside, to show how contingency theory was a realistic description of the practitioners' world and why two-way symmetry was impractical and inflexible, Yarbrough et al. (1998) applied it to how conflicts were managed by C. Richard Yarbrough, managing director-communications of the 1996 Atlanta Committee for the Olympic Games (ACOG). Three episodes, one

involving the moving of preliminary volleyball matches from one venue to another due to the conflict between gay activists and local politicians who had passed an anti-gay resolution; the second involving a conflict between the ACOG board of directors and the media concerning the disclosure of executive salaries; and the third involving a conflict between the ACOG and a minority minister over an Olympic sponsor, illustrated how textured the conflicts were and how dynamic changes in stance were effected on the continuum. For the second episode, for instance, even though the ACOG initially practiced an advocacy stance against the disclosure of salaries, it finally relented due to the influence of situational factors, particularly changes mandated by a higher authority, the International Olympic Council (IOC) that forced its hands to move to the end of the continuum towards accommodation. The study proved not just the "sophisticated process" of assessment and management of a given situation, but that effective, ethical public relations can be practiced "in a full range of places on the continuum from advocacy to accommodation" (p. 55).

Insight 2: If crisis communication is "most effective when it is part of the decision process itself" (Seeger 2006: 236), before organizations or practitioners adopt a stance or position in communication, they have to work in some key factors as they consider the decisions. These factors are critical in reflecting the characteristics, intents, and motivations of the organization (predisposing factors) as well as the external constraints, demands, and realities of the crisis (situational factors). For example, where communication is not possible during the crisis, it may mean that the decision, based on overriding concerns of the organization (proscriptive factors), prevents it from doing so.

Crisis Lesson Point: If crisis communication is reconceived as enactment of stances along a continuum, organizations and practitioners now have a framework and structure to understand the basis, intents, and motivations of each decision prior to adoption of each stance. Predisposing factors shed light on the decisions that need to be considered *before* organizations and practitioners enter into crisis communication; situational factors illuminate the decisions behind each stance movement *during* crisis communication; proscriptive factors set parameters on why crisis communication may sometimes be curtailed. By understanding the dynamic interactions and interrelations of these factors, organizations and practitioners are able to assess how and why their decisions have impact on their actions.

Theory Development: Structural Analyses of Contingency Factors (2001–2006)

An organization . . . experiencing crisis must listen to the concerns of the public, take these concerns into account . . . public's perception is its reality.
(Seeger 2006: 238–9)

Crisis Challenge: What are the straws that organizations and practitioners can grasp as they are confronted with the realities of crises?

Over the years, the central tenet of the contingency theory has resolutely remained, that organizations practice a variety of stances on the continuum, and the stances taken are influenced by a welter of factors. Based on the key words, stance on the continuum and factors, a wealth of research has been carried out, either to explain and illustrate the theory further, or to expand and extend key aspects of the theory, leading to developments of new theoretical frameworks. Three streams of research are evident: first, research has been carried out to elaborate, affirm, explain, or add new factors that further expound on the dynamism of movement along the continuum; second, explicating of stance movement along the continuum; and third, predicting the enactment of strategies based on the stance adopted.

Analyses of factors influencing stance

With over eighty distinct factors identified in the contingency theory, Cameron and his colleagues acknowledged that to manage them in "any useful way" (Cameron et al. 2001: 247), parsimony was needed. While the proscriptive variables had been found to limit dialogue and accommodation, further delineation of the relative influences of factors was needed. Acknowledging that much of the claims of the theory had been found based on qualitative research, Reber and Cameron (2003) set out to test the construct of five thematic variables through scale building on 91 top public relations practitioners. The five thematic variables were external threats, external public characteristics, organizational characteristics, public relations department characteristics, and dominant coalition characteristics. The authors found that the scales supported "the theoretical soundness of contingency and the previous qualitative testing of contingency constructs" (p. 443). Significantly, for each of the thematic variables, they discovered the attitudes of public relations practitioners towards each of the thematic variables that would affect the organizations' willingness to dialogue. Some of the key insights the authors found relating to the thematic variables included:

External threats: contrary to their earlier study, government regulations would not impede dialogue with a public because they were "infrequent enough" (p. 443). However, organizations would not engage in dialogue with a public if that legitimized its claims by talking to them.

External public characteristics: the size, credibility, commitment, and power of the external public were attributes an organization would consider in their willingness to engage in dialogue.

Organizational characteristics: the past negative experiences and the presence of in-house counsel were likely to affect the organization's willingness to dialogue.

Public relations department characteristics: public relations practitioners' membership in the dominant coalition would affect the organization's willingness to dialogue.

Dominant coalition characteristics: when public relations practitioners are represented in the dominant coalition, organizations are likely to practice symmetrical communication.

The need for public relations practitioners to be represented in the dominant coalition was also a similar finding made by Shin, Cameron, and Cropp (2002). In their survey of 800 practitioners, they found the dominating factors influencing public relations activities and by extension, the enactment of organizational stance, to be the dominant coalition's support and understanding of public relations and the dominant coalition's involvement with its external publics. In a further study, Shin, Cameron, and Cropp (2006) argued that in the midst of the constant call for public relations to be given a seat "at the table," public relations practitioners should ensure that they were "qualified and empowered to practice autonomously" (p. 286).

The theme of the need for public relations practitioners to be represented in the dominant coalition and to be involved in the frontlines of conflict management was further emphasized in the study by Reber, Cropp, and Cameron (2003) in which the authors described the tension of a hostile takeover for Conrail, Inc. by Norfolk Southern Corporation. While legal practitioners' involvement in high profile crisis was a given, the study found that the dynamism of a conflict necessitated conflicts to be fought not just on the legal front but the public relations front as well. Where regulatory, legal, and jurisdictional constraints forbade dialogue and negotiations to move to a higher level, public persuasion through the utilization of strategic communication initiatives and ingenuity went a long way to assuage hostile opinion. When legal and public relations worked together, as did the practitioners at Norfolk Southern, much could be achieved. Where legal involvement was restricted, the authors argued that public relations could be viewed as a "constructive creator of antecedent conditions for alternative dispute resolution" (p. 19).

Insight 3: If management of publics is paramount, organizations and practitioners would want to take cognizance of the threat involved in the crisis, and the make-up and influence of the publics, even as they seek to understand the interplay of factors at work before and as they embark on crisis communication.

Crisis Lesson Point: Understanding the make-up of the organization, incorporating and institutionalizing the involvement of public relations practitioners, and recognizing the dominance of the top management collectively play key roles in deciding how the organization should evaluate the importance of publics. Top management may possess organizational dominance, but public relations practitioners possess greater expertise to advise the top management

on the value of stakeholder relationships. Set against the organizational backdrop, they are often to agree on a level of comfort in addressing stakeholder concerns.

New factors and new tests

With studies showing evidence of the theoretical rigor and validity of the contingency theory's grouping of the factors into existing themes (Reber & Cameron 2003; Shin et al. 2002, 2006), subsequent studies progressed to examine how the theory could be used to address issues of international conflict and public relations practice across cultures. In the first test of the contingency theory in the management of an international conflict, Zhang, Qui, and Cameron (2004) examined how the United States and China resolved the crisis over the collision of a US Navy reconnaissance plane with a Chinese fighter jet in the South China Sea in April 2001. The authors found further evidence that supported the dominant coalition's moral conviction as a key characteristic in precluding accommodation and proscribing dialogue.

The theory was also applied extensively to examine public relations practice in South Korea in various studies. In their survey, Shin et al. (2006) reinforced the earlier findings of Shin et al. (2002) that organizational variables such as the involvement of the dominant coalition played a dominant role in defining public relations practice. This in turn constrained public relations activities, most notably, in the release of negative information and in the handling of conflict situations.

Choi and Cameron (2005) sought to understand how multinational corporations (MNCs) practiced public relations in South Korea and what contingent factors impacted their stances in conflict situations. The authors identified a new contingent variable that was added to the matrix when they found that most MNCs tended to utilize accommodative stances based on fear. They feared the Korean media's negative framing of issues toward MNCs, which often caused them to move from advocacy to accommodation. They feared the cultural heritage of Korean people, a concept based on *Cheong* where clear distinctions were made between those who were part of them and those who were not. "In Korean culture, We-ness that tends to clearly distinguish our-side from not our-side, and *Cheong* is usually given to our-side (e.g., Korean firms) seem to influence how Korean audiences interpret MNCs' messages and behaviors" (p. 186). Choi and Cameron (2005) also uncovered another new contingent variable (*Netizen*) in their study of how an entertainment company dealt with its promotion of public nudity in cell phones.

In all the studies, the contingency theory had been conceived to explain interorganizational conflicts and practice between organizations and their diverse publics. Pang, Cropp, and Cameron (2006) extended the theory further to understand how it could be used to explain conflict and practice in an intra-organizational setting. In their case study of a Fortune 500 organization, the authors found that within an organization, the most important public, and by extension, the greatest source of conflict for public relations practitioners, was the dominant

coalition. A less enlightened dominant coalition, coupled with a conservative corporate culture, and the lack of access and representation of public relations in the dominant coalition, were found to be factors that impeded the effectiveness of practitioners.

Insight 4: If it is incumbent for organizations to manage and understand its audience, as Seeger (2006) argued, then it is paramount for the crisis agenda to assume management priority.

Crisis Lesson Point: The character and competence of dominant individuals in the top management is one of the most important determinants and constants in managing the unfolding events and in how the organization conducts its crisis communication campaigns. It does appear that leaders who are involved, open to change, proactive, altruistic, supportive of public relations, and been in frequent contact with publics are better placed to lead.

Stance Movements (2004–2007)

> *A best practice of crisis communication, then, is to acknowledge the uncertainty inherent in the situation with statements such as, "The situation is fluid," and, "We do not yet have all the facts." This form of strategic ambiguity allows the communicator to refine the message as more information becomes available and avoid statements that are likely to be shown as inaccurate as more information becomes available (Ulmer & Sellnow 2000).*
>
> (Seeger 2006: 241–2)

Crisis Challenge: Why do organizations and practitioners continue to adopt a "no comment" position in crisis communication, thus appearing to stonewall, when they can rely on other finessed options?

In terms of the driving force of stance movement, Pang, Jin, and Cameron (2004) found that situational variables could play a significant role in moving an advocacy stance towards accommodation. Shin et al. (2005) argued that an organization and its publics that are involved in a conflict often began with an advocacy stance rather than accommodation.

Though the contingency theory had conceived stance movements as exclusively advocacy, accommodation, or a point between advocacy and accommodation along the continuum, subsequent studies have found dynamism in stance movements where both advocacy and accommodation could be utilized and embedded one in the other at the same time. In their study of how the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) was managed, for instance, Jin et al. (2006) found that though the Singapore government adopted an advocacy stance towards its publics, it also used accommodative stance to " 'sugar', if you will, seemingly harsh medication it was advocating" (p. 100). For instance, the authors found that while the Singapore

government imposed strict regulations on the quarantine of infected patients and caregivers, especially after it became known that more medical practitioners such as nurses were becoming infected by their patients, it was also accommodative and promptly instituted measures to provide financial relief to ease the pain of the policies it was imposing.

In their study of the intra-organizational tensions between public relations practitioners and their dominant coalition, Pang et al. (2006) found that even though an organization's dominant coalition accommodated to the formulation of a regional crisis plan, it began to assume a more advocating stance even as it appeared to accommodate. The authors found that this was due to the conservative values, production-driven, and patriarchal management style of the dominant coalition, coupled with its apparent lack of support and understanding of communication functions. The authors termed the simultaneous advocacy and accommodative stance as "advocacy embedded in accommodation." At the same time, the authors also found a reverse phenomenon, what they termed "accommodation embedded in advocacy." This happened when acts of accommodation were displayed by line managers towards the public relations practitioners even when the prevailing atmosphere instituted by the dominant coalition was one of advocacy.

Insight 5: In addressing fluid situations, the organization is given the flexibility of assuming different stances to different publics during crisis at a given point in time.

Crisis Lesson Point: Movement along the continuum is never meant to be static. In some situations, it may mean having to accommodate, while in others, to accommodate on one level and advocate on another, as long as the stances assumed are not used, as Seeger (2006) argued, to "avoid disclosing uncomfortable information or closing off further communication" (p. 242), where possible. On some issues, crisis communication may eventuate on an accommodative note, while on other non-negotiable issues like those cited in the proscriptive factors, it may permanently situate on the advocacy mode. Crisis communication may not always be a "win-win" situation; neither must be it a situation where one party wins and the other loses. It is a dynamic process of dialogue and negotiation.

What Does It Mean for Crisis Communication?

Theory construction in public relations can be an arduous process, argued Broom (2006). It typically begins with a concept "derived from practice and viewed by practitioners as important" (p. 142). Certainly, a theory grounded in the practitioners' world often adds rich layers of context to understanding how theory and practice can integrate (Pang et al. 2006). Increasingly, Heath and Coombs (2006) argued, accepted wisdom, "seats-of-the-pants thinking," must be "guided by theory" (p. 197).

The ten best practices in crisis communication are: process approaches and policy development; pre-event planning; partnerships with public; listening to public's concerns and understand the audience; honesty, candor, and openness; collaborate and coordinate with credible sources; meet of the needs of the media and remain accessible; communicate with compassion, concern, and empathy; accept uncertainty and ambiguity; messages of self-efficacy. This list was compiled in the *Journal of Applied Communication Research*'s special issue on crisis communication in 2006, which is synthesized from the body of crisis communication scholarship by the National Center for Food Protection and Defense (NCFPD) of the Department of Homeland Security, and may have provided some effective principles. However, the ten best practices largely neglect the need to understand the dynamics and complexity organizations face in crisis. The rigor and versatility of the contingency theory, thus, is argued to fill the gap in what Fishman (1999) bemoaned as existing approaches lacking in ability to "deal with a 'crisis communication situation' i.e., multi-partied problems with varied levels of strategic options and multi-dimensional harms" (p. 362).

How does the theory do that? The operative phrase: *Strategic* management. In discussing this, it would be useful to draw the relevance of the five insights distilled.

First, reprogramming our thinking on how crisis communication can take place, i.e., through the adoption of stances along a continuum instead of adhering to a set model of communication (Insight 1), affords organizations *strategic* options to engage in "out-of-the-box" thinking.

Second, the theory exhorts organizations to engage in *strategic* analyses before and as they embark on crisis communication. Cognizance of the predisposing, situational, and proscriptive variables (Insight 2) would help organizations understand the complex realities they are working with in the crises.

Third, the theory calls for a *strategic* assessment of the nature of the publics and the multi-dimensionality of external threats (Insight 3). This is extrapolated against the interplay of factors internally to meet the external demands from the crises and publics.

Fourth, while the criticality of the role of the dominant coalition in crises may have been well documented (see Marra 1998; Pauchant & Mitroff 1992; Ray 1999), this is reinforced by the findings of the theory. The character and competence of dominant individuals in the top management is one of the most important determinants and constants in managing the unfolding events and the way the organization conducts its crisis communication campaigns (Insight 4), without which, a crisis communication campaign would not have *strategic* impact among the cacophony of competing voices in the chaotic marketplace.

Fifth, given the ambiguity and uncertainty inherent in crises (Seeger 2006), organizations seek directions to help them negotiate through the minefields while understanding the options open to them. *Strategic* adoption of stances along the continuum affords organizations a framework to assess the motivations of their positions, and grants them a preview of the likely outcomes of their actions.

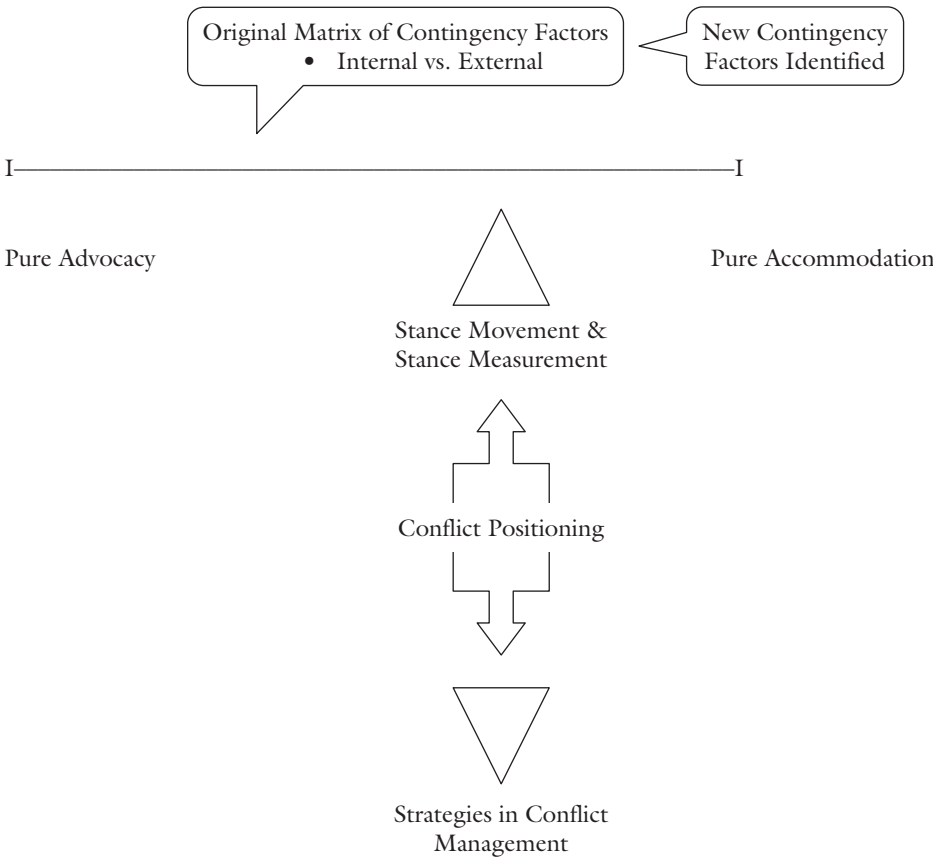

Figure 26.1 The evolution of contingency theory of strategic conflict management

Building on foundational work across ten years since its inauguration, the contingency theory as a paradigm in the arena of strategic communication has been evolved, modified, tested, and improved consistently. Figure 26.1 is a visual summary of these ideas. Public relations must emulate fields such as law, engineering, and medicine to mature as a science and to gain further respect in organizations.

Medical doctors do not insist that cancer conforms to a small handful of factors. For example, MDs take into account the type of tumor, the stage of disease, the patient's age, gender, race, and health history (dozens of factors in itself), genetic factors, interaction effects of radiological, chemical, and surgical interventions, and so forth. Embracing complexity has led to more powerful diagnoses and treatment, flying in the face of easy closure or "cubist" depictions of social reality – the offering of facets of a complete image that must then be pieced back together intuitively.

In assessing the relevance of a theory, perhaps Grunig's (2006) insights could not have been better argued:

> We can judge a theory to be good, therefore, if it makes sense of reality (in the case of a positive, or explanatory, theory) or if it helps to improve reality (in the case of normative theory). Public relations scholars need to develop both positive and normative theories – to understand how public relations is practiced and to improve its practice – for the organization, the publics, and for society. (p. 152)

The contingency theory has thus far offered a perspective supported by empirical foundations. By Grunig's (2006) definition, it is a positive theory. At the same time, it does argue that while it has triggered a paradigmatic movement in public relations thinking, having met Kuhn's (1996) criteria that it has, first, attracted "an enduring group of adherents away from competing modes of scientific activity," and second, being "sufficiently open-ended to leave all sorts of problems for the redefined group of practitioners to resolve" (p. 16), it does not posit to be normative theory because it does not prescribe what ought to be. Yet the work is cut out for contingency theorists to address the unanswered questions that need to be resolved, refined, and redefined. We all hope to make the world a better place, a little easier to understand. Broom (2006) could not have said it better: it is "our mission and our calling. Godspeed" (p. 149).

Appendix 1: Contingency Factors

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 non-existence 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 total 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/open or closed 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' perceptions of the company
- Marring of the personal reputations of the company 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 other's 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

External variables

Threats

- Litigation
- Government regulation
- Potentially damaging publicity
- Scarring of company's reputation in 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 or not
- 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

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