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### Integrated crisis mapping: Toward a publics-based, emotion-driven conceptualization in crisis communication

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

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### **Abstract**

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

### **Key words**

Crisis management, emotion, publics.

## **Introduction**

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

While most of these strategies are often characterized as direct responses to the crisis (Cowden & Sellnow, 2002; Fearn-Banks, 2002; Fink, 1986; Harrison, 1999; Massey, 2001; Pauchant & Mitroff, 1992; Seegar & Ulmer, 2002; Ulmer, 2001), Ray (1999: 20) argued that strategies would either, (1) deny the crisis exists; (2) provide “partial, inaccurate, or delayed information”; or (3) maintain an open communication channels with constituents. Still, candor and openness, where possible, is a hallmark of excellent crisis communication, argued Greer and Moreland (2003).

### ***Current situation-based conceptualization of crisis response***

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

propriate to be used when the situation leads to a loss of face. When face is threatened, face works is used to repair image, argued Benoit & Brinson (1994). This usually occurs when the accused is believed to have committed an offensive act by its salient audience (Benoit, 2004). Face, image, and reputation are extremely important commodities, argued Benoit and Brinson (1994), because, as a society, we pride ourselves on, and value those who enact tolerance, and sensitivity, to the feelings and traditions of others (Benoit, 1999). Coombs' (1998) strategies are positioned according to the situation based on the organization's locus of control. On one hand, when the organization is deemed to have strong personal control over the crisis, more accommodative strategies like full apology are recommended for use. On the other hand, when the organization has weak control over the crisis, more defensive strategies like attack and denial are recommended.

### ***Conceptualizing emotions in crisis response***

While these situation-based crisis responses serve as vital roadmaps to understand the crisis situation, it is argued that a more generic and systemic approach would be to shape crisis responses from an *emotion-based* perspective: To understand what are the emotional upheavals that the publics involved in the crisis are likely to experience so that strategies can be streamlined to address their specific needs. Studies argued that the perception of a crisis, particularly from a given public, is not strictly a function of an environmental stimulus itself, but involves an interpretation of the stimulus (Carver, 1977). Emotion is argued to be a critical stimulus. Lazarus (1991: 38) defined emotion as “organized cognitive-motivational-relational configurations whose status changes with changes in the person-environment relationship as this is perceived and evaluated (appraisal)”. In a crisis, as the conflict between the publics and the organization develops, emotions are one of the anchors in the publics' interpretation of what is unfolding, changing, and shaping. Jin and Cameron (2004) proposed three key roles that emotion plays in public relations: 1) As a marker or indicator of the effectiveness of a public relations campaign, with respect to the overall persuasiveness of organizational message; 2) As the moderator of impact on a public's attitude toward the organization; 3) As a key factor in organizational deci-

sion-making, since most decisions are argued to be shared (O'Shaughnessy & O'Shaughnessy, 2003) in a crisis.

While it is beyond our scope to examine the emotional responses of all the different layers of publics that are involved in a crisis, we propose to understand the emotional responses of the primary publics involved in the crisis, an audience which Benoit (2004) classifies as people who are directly involved in the situation. This article, thus, calls for, and argues that a more accurate way of shaping crisis response would be from the *emotion-driven* perspective of the primary publics. To do that, we attempt to examine, distill, and integrate the existing crisis framework into our conceptualization of a crisis prototype of emotion coping strategies. Second, we draw on the rich tapestry of literature on emotions from the psychological and behavioral sciences to identify what and how emotions feature in each aspect in our crisis prototype. Lastly, with the conceptual model that we have developed, we aim to come up with suggestions on how strategies can be developed to address the range of emotions in the model. Our model rests on three operating assumptions. First, we capture the emotions of an active, primary public. Latent or potential publics in a crisis, by virtue of the fact that they are not evident to the organization, are not included in the model. Second, the emotions are dominant emotions displayed by primary publics. In this regard, we would not be able to include emotions masked from the organization, like apathy, which can be argued as the absence of emotions. Third, organizational response to the crisis is based on the emotions identified and displayed by the primary publics.

The significance of arguing for an emotion-driven approach in crisis communication are three fold: First, if effective crisis communication is managing key stakeholders and mitigating unfounded anxieties (Coombs, 1999; Plowman et al, 1995; Ray, 1999), this conceptual approach attempts to identify the diverse and varied emotions likely to be experienced by the key stakeholders in a crisis. Second, we aim to provide an alternative perspective to current theories, thereby contributing further to theoretical development to an interdisciplinary field of public relations, strategic communication, and conflict management. Third, it is hoped that this emotion-driven perspective would have practical values to practitioners: How they can understand, with greater preciseness, and

empathy, what emotional upheavals their primary publics are likely to experience so that they can shape the appropriate crisis response and tools to manage the crisis with optimal effectiveness.

## **Review of current crisis models**

### ***Current models of crisis types***

Current conceptualizations of crisis have been, at best, varied, from myriad perspectives. Fearn-Banks' (2002) conceptualization, for instance, ranged from internal crises like plant closing, to external crises like strikes; from personal like suicides, to public like workplace violence. Other conceptualizations group crisis generally according to types, for instance, accidents and natural events. Further classification provided by Mitroff and Anagnos (2001) attempt to demarcate further crisis types into economic, like labor unrest; informational, like loss of confidential information; physical, like breakdown of equipment; reputational, like damage to corporate reputation.

Seegar, Sellnow and Ulmer (2003) streamlined the classification into public perception; natural disasters; product; terrorist attacks; economic; human resource; industrial; oil and chemical spills; transport; and organization's environment. Lerbinger's (1997) checklist of crisis types from three perspectives: crises of the physical world, like natural disasters and technology; crises of the human climate, like confrontation and malevolence; and crises of management failure, like skewed values, deception, and misconduct. Such classifications are, respectfully, helpful, except that they shed little light on how such typologies enhance organizational understanding, and in turn, provide a glimpse of how an organization can respond. Pauchant and Mitroff (1992) extended theoretical understanding by distinguishing types into the extent of severity (severe to normal), and primary impact. On one end of the spectrum are technological and economic crises, with primary impact on the organization. On the other end of the spectrum are human and social crises, with primary impact on the people who staff the organization. Coombs (1995) further delineated the primary impact to the organization into internal and external control, and whether the crisis stems from an intentional or

unintentional act of negligence and/or malice on the organization's part. Control is further operationalized between strong and weak organizational control (Coombs, 1998).

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

### ***Primary publics in crises***

Publics are a "group of people who face a common issue" (Gonzalez-Herrero & Pratt, 1996, p. 84). In a crisis, the publics have been defined differently, according to their importance to resolving situation, their functional roles, and their long-term influences. Lukaszewski (1997) argued that there are four key publics that the organization must communicate with, and priorities must be made to communicate with them as soon as possible. They are: (1) Those most directly affected, the victims; (2) The employees, who may bear the brunt of the wrath from the publics; (3) Those indirectly affected like families and relatives; and (4) The news media and other channels of external communication. Dougherty (1992) preferred to examine publics in terms of their functional roles. Enabling publics, which include shareholders, board of directors and regulatory agencies, have the power and authority to control the organization's resources. Functional publics mainly consist of the organization's consumers. Normative publics are formed because of shared values, like political or interest groups. Diffused publics are people who are not members of a formal organization, yet, nonetheless, powerful groups. Ulmer (2001) categorized publics in terms of their long-term influences. He regarded the primary public as the community in which the organization works, and the employees. The customer and the media would be classified as a secondary public.

In crisis situations, we thus propose that the primary publics comprise the following characteristics: 1) They are most affected by the crisis; 2) They have shared common interests, and destiny, in seeing the crisis resolved; and 3) They have long-term interests, and influences, on the organization's reputation and operation.



### ***Range of emotions in crises***

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

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

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

### ***Public responses based on key emotions***

Based on the above appraisal model of emotion, we propose a theoretical framework to understand the primary publics' crisis responses, as evidenced by the predominant emotion elicited by different types of

crises. In a crisis, Lazarus (1991) argued that there are predominantly six negative emotions (Anger, Fright, Anxiety, Guilt, Shame, and Sadness) based upon different appraisal, driven by different core relational themes. For the purposes of organizational understanding, we would argue that four of the six (anger, fright, anxiety, and sadness) are dominant emotions experienced by the publics, with guilt and shame secondary or subsumed emotions, particularly external publics, like victims, who are less subject to guilt or shame.



Figure 1: Integrated Crisis Mapping conceptualization

*Anger.* The core relational theme underlying anger is a demanding offense against “me” and “mine” (Lazarus, 1991). In crisis situation, the primary publics tend to experience anger when facing a demanding offense from certain organization against them or their well being. In an organizational context, the primary public will want to find out what the organization has been doing is relevant on two levels. First, the ego-involvement of the public is engaged to preserve or enhance their identity or benefit in the situation. Second, there is usually an issue of blam-

ing. Specifically, this blame derives from the knowledge that the organization is accountable for the harmful actions and they could have been controlled or even prevented by the organization. The organization is invariably the object of blame.

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

*Fright.* The core relational theme underneath fright is facing uncertain and existential threat (Lazarus, 1991). In terms of the public's appraisal process, they find the situation of dealing with the organization as goal relevant yet incongruent. Organization-based identity issue or ego-involvement issue might or might not be relevant in the fright. Secondly, given the nature of the crisis, the public may either blame the organization or not.

As far as coping strategy is concerned, the public is not certain about how to cope with the loss as well as how the involved organization may handle this situation. Depending on their resource and power, they may choose avoidance or escape from the crisis as a viable recourse (action tendency).

*Anxiety.* By definition, anxiety stems from the core relational theme as facing an immediate, concrete, and overwhelming danger (Lazarus, 1991). The public may feel overwhelmed by the crisis situation and look for the immediate solutions. Accordingly, the public may go through the following appraisal process: They may assess the situation as relevant but not congruent with their goal of survival. Their ego-involvement is evidenced as the effort to protect their own ego-identity against the organization whom they perceive to be the direct source of existential threat. Secondly, they might blame or not blame the organization depending on their environment assessment. Given the uncertainty of

how to cope with the situation and what the organization might react, they tend to avoid and escape. Noticeably, the action tendencies of publics under fright and anxiety overlap. This may give crisis managers in the organization sufficient consolidation of resources to effectively deal with the publics under these situations.

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

***Integrating publics' emotions in crisis:  
Proposing a new crisis matrix***

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

Our crisis conceptualization is one based on our analysis of the level of organizational involvement in the crisis, based on the existing categorizations of crises. Organizational involvement can be examined through a scale of high involvement and low involvement. Based on the above, we have developed a crisis matrix based on two axes. On the **X-axis** is the publics' coping strategy. Coping strategy refers to the dominant choice of the publics in dealing with the crisis situation: Either 1) cognitive coping – the public try to sort out a way of thinking or interpreting the meaning of the crisis with regard to their well-being, or 2)

conative coping – the public try to manage the situation so as to alter a troubled relationship or to sustain a desirable one by taking actions or at least show their tendency of action. Anchoring these two coping strategies to the axis, different primary publics in different crises may choose different coping strategy along this continuum. Therefore, this X-axis consists of cognitive and behavioral efforts to manage specific external or internal demands (and conflicts between them) that are appraised as exceeding the resources of the public. Adapting emotion theory (Lazarus, 1991), there are two types of coping: 1) problem-focused coping – changing the actual relationship between the public and the organization via actual measures and steps, and 2) cognitive-focused coping – changing only the way in which the relationship is interpreted by the public. As the key components of appraisal process, this involves coping strategies and action tendency. During the coping process, the publics can alter or revise their interpretations based on the exigency of the situation. For instance, an accident, which demands high involvement from the organization and necessitates a cognitive coping strategy, may begin with sadness as the primary level dominant emotion. A secondary level response might be fright, when the results are not evident or satisfactory, as they normally are, given the extenuating circumstances of the crisis.

On the **Y-axis** is the level of organizational involvement, ranging from high to low. In each of the quadrant are categorizations of crisis types, conceptualized based on three criteria: 1) Internal-external; 2) Personal-public; and 3) Unnatural-natural.

An external-public-natural crisis, like economic downturn, natural disaster, and accident, would likely call for higher level of involvement from the organization. For instance, the 2005 Tsunami disaster that swept across most parts of Asia is one no government could ever plan for. Coombs (1998) categorized these events as external locus of control and weak personal responsibility on the organization's part. At the same time, some variations of catastrophe, involving internal-public-natural or unnatural, like labor unrest, and loss of reputation as a result of mismanagement, require high organizational involvement as well. While serious, some internal-personal-unnatural (i.e., man-made) crisis, like human resource problem involving employees, or psychopathic acts, necessitate relatively less intense organizational involvement, particularly when the

organization did not cause these problems to arise. In each of the quadrants is the dominant emotion, based on the confluence, interactions, and inter-relations of the publics' coping strategy as well as organizational involvement.

### ***Implications***

This new integrated crisis mapping approach provides new directions for crisis model building and a more precise way of shaping crisis response by considering the primary publics' affective reactions. Based on our crisis matrix, future research can be done to enhance the understanding of the continuum of organizational involvement and the publics' coping strategy by developing and testing concomitant operationalization and measurements. For the composition of the emotional spectra and the mechanism of the filtering, transferring and co-existence of primary and secondary emotions, further cross-disciplinary efforts are needed. Given that effective crisis communication depends on how well the key stakeholders and ameliorating unfounded anxieties are managed (Coombs, 1999; Plowman et al, 1995; Ray, 1999), this model may shed light on how to identify the diverse and varied emotions likely to be experienced by the key stakeholders in a crisis and how strategies can be developed to address the range of emotions in the model, by focusing on the public's cognitive coping or conative coping or mixed coping strategies.

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## Notes

- 1 **Organizational involvement.** *High organizational involvement:* Operationalized as intense, consolidated, sustained, and priority in allocation of resources to deal with the crisis.  
*Low organizational involvement:* It does not mean cursory or no involvement, but that the organization devotes comparatively less resources, effort, and energy to deal with the crisis, either because the



organization recognizes there is little it can do, or when the organization did not cause the crisis, it is depending on external help, like a regulatory agency, to help it resolve the crisis.

**Emotions and coping strategy.** *High involvement/Cognitive coping:* The primary level emotion is sadness; and the secondary level emotion is fright. These are crises which give rise to emotion which primary publics can only comprehend at the cognitive level. With further comprehension based on coping strategy, these may give rise to a suppressed emotion.

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

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

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