

# Communications Strategies in Crisis

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## *Abstract*

*During major technological crisis, involved organizations often find themselves facing huge problems of communication. This brings in its wake operational paralysis and a destruction of public image. Lack of preparation, a history of unawareness of risk realities, low internal mobilization, underdeveloped external networks, and poor links with the media and public opinion, lead to spectacular failures in organizations. Organizations must re-examine their repertoire of crisis handling practices in order to develop good communications strategies.*

Experience shows that before grafting on new means of communication, it is necessary to examine several fundamental issues; 1) instant reflexes which come into play at the first threat of crisis unfailingly lead organizations to instantaneous breakdown; 2) insufficiencies in existing organizational measures may lead to more incoherent action in turbulent situations; 3) difficulties encountered in conducting public communications, and major options available in this area; and, 4) the mentalities which impregnate the life of organizations and which constitute a matrix of practices.

In this era of major technological risk, organizations appear vulnerable to low probability high impact events. Several factors often converge to give these breakdowns a highly destabilising effect. These factors include the extent of damage, the duration of the accident and its effects, technical incertitude, socio-economic stakes, the disintegration of the networks of "players" involved (multiplication in the number of intervening parties, internal divisions, external conflicts), and media pressure. These factors convert accidents into crises (Lagadec, 1984; 1985 (a), (b); 1986).

In this context of high turbulence, establishing communications becomes a strategic factor for successful coping. Experience shows just how necessary it is to master multiple lines of communication, including internal communications in the organizations concerned, inter-organizational communications, and communications with the public via the media.

And yet, even the best organizations find themselves tied up in knots, when they have to respond to such requirements. In most situations, the uncertainty about ultimate effects and the attitudes of those responsible for the event, are sources of insufficiencies in crisis management. Organizational insufficiencies cause failures in actions taken by networks of official agencies.

The permanent pressure exerted by the media is a primary challenge. Fueled by media reports, the public, more aware than in the past, develops a resolute suspicion at the first sign of incoherence and a radical rejection at the least trace of dissimulation. A difficulty or a fault in communication leads rapidly to wild accusations levelled at all and sundry—a veritable gangrene for all delicate post-accident situations.

Dealing with crisis communications requires answers to a wide range of questions. How to react in the face of a full-scale catastrophe? How to bring under control destabilising events? How to prevent ill-informed individuals from escalating panic through fantasy? While it is too early to give definitive answers or tactical solutions to these questions, here we examine four themes highlighting some points of reference available to managers.

### *How To Avoid Instant Stalemate*

There are no recipes that can assure success in dealing with crises. However, the use of simple methods can help avoid a stalemate in communications.

a) *Before the event happens*—organizations possess certain characteristics that hinder communications. These include, inadequate accident prevention systems, information unadapted to existing risks and emergency plans, limited credibility, and fragile legitimacy. So, when the event does happen, this context nullifies the best efforts in communication. Public reactions crystallise around these general conditions and organizational responses are denounced as unacceptable.

Let us take two illustrations. After the Seveso accident but before the Seveso drums affair, Hoffmann-LaRoche had initiated a policy of openness towards the public. However, earlier years of impenetrable silence by the firm was not forgotten. Very quickly, while the drums remained unfound, a reaction of hostile suspicion hit the Basle firm. Public reaction was a simple, “We knew it, Hoffmann-LaRoche is irresponsible.” Summing up the public reaction towards his company, an official of the firm confided to us, “We’ve been overtaken by our past.” The efforts of their press department did not succeed in dispelling their poor reputation. In the opinion of those we spoke to in Basle, this apparently simple affair, represented a more thorny crisis than the Seveso accident itself.

The second illustration deals with measures taken to alert the public after an accident. It concerns the steps taken by Union Carbide Corporation, after a serious accident on August 11, 1985, at their Institute, West Virginia plant—a sister factory of the Bhopal plant. According to Union Carbide officials we met, this accident was more critical for the company and its image than the Bhopal disaster of December 3, 1984. According to *Newsweek*, few people around the Institute’s plant knew what to do in case of an alert. Although, according to their plant spokesman, a letter outlining the plant’s emergency programs had been addressed to them every year since 1975—few had received it. And *Newsweek* goes on to state: “If they had, they might still be confused.” According to the letter, two three-second blasts of the plant’s whistle means a fire or medical emergency; three three-second blasts

means a gas release; two-second blasts every three seconds for two minutes, with two-second blasts every 30 seconds means a major disaster. Instructions for what to do were equally confusing: "if the wind is blowing favorably, stay put. If the wind is blowing toward you from the plant, evacuate by going crosswind. In some cases, you can see the fumes as a white cloud," the letter added. "However, this is not always the case so don't depend on your eyes." (*Newsweek*, 1985, p. 40, 44).

Generally speaking, basic misinterpretation can be avoided, by following two simple prescriptions. First, is the imperative of prevention. This was underlined recently by the director of the British Health and Safety Executive addressing industrialists during a symposium in London "Put caution into the process, not into the telling" (Health and Safety Executive, 1985).

The second step is to widely disseminate preliminary information on existing risks, as provided for in article 8 of the EEC Seveso Directive. This article states, "Member states shall ensure that persons liable to be affected by a major accident which may originate in a notified activity be informed in an appropriate manner of the safety measures and of the correct behaviour to adopt in the event of an accident" (Consiel Des Communautés Européennes, 1982).

*Diagnosis No. 1 (a)*: One cannot make up for irresponsibility through "good" communication, even when inspired by the best marketing techniques.

(b) *Once the event has happened*, a series of reflexes can lead to media catastrophes. The following common types of behaviors should be avoided.

- A silence heavy with embarrassment.
- Immediate declarations of the type, "nothing has happened, and besides everything is under control."
- Denials until the press finds out by itself.
- Blank mask responses or refusals leading to a social combat of the "David and Goliath" type.
- The inability to give details about the event, earlier events, or similar risks.
- An attitude of dissimulation creating an impression that the affair is a real mess and that determined research will wring out "confessions" which are even more devastating for those in charge and fabulous for the media.

The case of the Mont Louis (which sank on 25 August 1985, carrying nuclear substance cargo), shows how quickly this type of scenario develops. Within 24 hours of the accident, even before agencies responsible had established their roles and decided on how to respond, the habitual forms of communication had done considerable harm.

Total silence and inexact declarations were noted down with precision and insistence by Agence France Presse. One image appeared immediately to colour everyone's perception of the affair: that of dissimulation.

This report reinforced the conviction that truth was being hidden from the public. It prepared the way for subsequent crises. Now the public believes that anything "nuclear" can only be linked with dissimulation. This is a truly damaging seed to

have planted. It will affect even small scale alerts in nuclear power-plants in the future, and erode people's faith in the authorities?

Similar elements can be found in the Rheims transformer explosion affair. There was ignorance of emergency signals, rejection of precise warnings given by officials, and a game of "musical chairs" being played to try and pin down an official spokesman. There were affirmations full of self-assurance, before any inquiry; a legal action against a building resident for leaving two or three cardboard boxes in the cellar; undiplomatic remarks, and non-rational appreciation of the problems of toxicity (one industrialist stated that only the "Seveso dioxin" was worrisome, while other chemicals were safe).

In brief, two mistakes seem to foster pre-conditions for a crisis (even where the events themselves are not particularly far-reaching). First is the construction of a maze in which truth and falsehood are elusive as are those in positions of responsibility. And second, is the opening up of this maze to the curiosity of observers. These observers are convinced about the mistakes and guilt of the involved officials, and believe that detailed questioning will lead to a never-ending chain of "revelations."

*Diagnosis No. 1 (b):* The first well-founded reactions often intervene only after quagmires have been produced. Quagmires in which officials lose much of their room for technical manoeuvring, their credibility and even their dignity. A necessary step toward preventing these quagmires and consequent crises, is the preparation of a list of existing organizational weaknesses and a list of the most "natural" pitfalls to be avoided.

### *Setting Up Measures To Cope With a Rapidly Disintegrating Universe*

Despite the recent development of policies in certain organizations, diagnosis here is still difficult. Our organizations do not generally have at their disposal:

- scanners to warn them of anomalies,
- systems to ensure an upward flashing of critical information,
- rapid deployment of external networks adapted to crisis situations,
- crisis management teams capable of ensuring that the problem is treated comprehensively.

*Diagnosis No. 2:* One often witnesses organizations collapsing and internal ruptures make it impossible for formulating strategies responsive to the crisis.

Continual scanning is important because of the time factor. Time available for communicating and reacting to crises is limited for operational reasons. Although organizations have good communication systems for their routine activities, communicative competence is not the same for situations in which the signal/noise difference is not sufficiently clear. Often, the detection of anomalies requires more information than what is available in normal communication. Senior management is generally only alerted after the affair has appeared in media headlines, and the situation has become inflamed (Scanlon, 1982 (a) and (b)). Often the crisis originates in an area of secondary importance to the organization. For example, it may concern waste materials, and not finished products; "simply" some drums, and

not a notified installation; a chemical product, and not a nuclear power plant; a non-strategic factory which is being run down, and not a site which is under constant surveillance. In these situations, the delay in awareness is all the more prolonged.

The soundness of internal communications is eroded with conflicts (even communication involving the senior management), which emerge during crises. This soon leads to each routine sub-system of the organization being “cut adrift and isolated”, at the precise moment when close interactions are needed.

The same is true externally. Crises necessitate immediate construction of ad-hoc networks; the establishment of working relations with strategic levels of all other intervening organizations. Technical difficulties, high stakes, competitors, lack of knowledge about the environment, habitual routines and their defenses, all equally contribute to temporary organizational collapse. When attempts are made during crises to contact other involved parties, they fail because the individuals contacted may not be powerful enough to overcome organizational barriers. The idea that it is better to stay where you are, without raising “premature questions” protects everyone from becoming involved in problems, which they lack the necessary powers to resolve.

When unscheduled crisis situations jolt an organization out of routine objectives and roles, early action on the part of top management is necessary to lead the responses of others. However, such action is rarely observed. Inside organizations, the same old lines of protection and demarcation provide fundamental frames of references for developing responses. Often, those out on the front line of action are too busy to seek interventions from the top management level.

Top executives absorbed in other tasks, and aware of the personal risks of becoming too closely associated with a crisis—are equally reticent to get involved. They only intervene in the final phase, when the problems are such that the field for manoeuvring has been considerably reduced by those left without any directives.

Here, the solution is to give more coherence to uncoordinated organizational responses by being consistent. Typical of this situation was an official who was put forward as a volunteer to speak on a big radio program without any preparatory meetings, and without a clear strategy. The only “advice” slipped under the door to this subaltern sent out to the front line was: “Be careful, this could be dangerous. . . .” In another case, a highly-placed official confided his astonishment to us, that, when cameras and microphones had to be faced, his superior was systematically unavailable. One could certainly argue that the ambiguity and indetermination of responsibilities serve as a protection for organizations. However, it is not certain that this smoke-screen strategy is really effective in the long-term.

Rules can help to establish new norms in these areas. An example is the internal notification procedure adopted by Union Carbide. The company has defined major accidents, requiring immediate information to be given to top officials in the firm, as:

- Multiple fatality accidents.
- Explosion or fire likely to result in national publicity.
- Bomb explosion or finding an explosive device placed in or near a Union Carbide facility.

- Product spill or other environmental accident likely to result in national publicity.
- Any threat or allegation relating to the facilities or personnel of the Corporation likely to result in national publicity or demanding a prompt corporate decision. (Union Carbide, 1984).

*Facing The Public: Points Of Reference And Questions*

The most important questions in crisis communications are; what to say to the media? What to say to the public? How to deal with the gravity, the incertitude of what is perhaps only a fantasy (but which may have fearful economic consequences?).

Donald R. Stephenson (Director, Corporate Communications, Dow Chemical, Canada) has clearly set out lessons learnt by his company from a number of crises (Stephenson, 1984, p.3):

- “1. The public must be fully informed frequently and accurately through the media, from the outset. This must be done by one or two highly credible senior spokesmen who understand the situation and can explain it calmly and clearly in lay language. The first 24 hours of a crisis are critical.
2. If this is not done, a public information vacuum probably will develop rapidly—and be filled by rumors or alarms far worse than the real situation.
3. Silence in the midst of a crisis implies guilt, whether justified or not.
4. It is not enough merely to assure the public that everything is O.K. and there’s no reason for alarm. To be credible, we must provide details of how that conclusion is drawn.
5. It is vital to realise that reporters face deadlines hour by hour. Information must always be correct, consistent and current, even if all the answers aren’t immediately available.”

Despite the petitions for openness, the reverse is often observed. The media is viewed as a problem and this evokes reactions of silence. The major reasons for silence are the following:

- Fear of sensationalising and its consequences, which may be provoked by the broadcasting of inaccurate news, or even too accurate information. Scanlon (1981) reports on this, in the field of hostage-taking. In this case the media let the terrorists know where the sharpshooters were positioned, making them feel they should probably substantially raise their ransom demand. In the field of accidents one might cite, the case of a radio report which, exacerbating public emotion, produced a forced interruption of a vital rescue operation from a pit in France.
- An impasse caused by the complex technical nature of the problems to be tackled (particularly the question of probabilities). Technological factors associated with accidents are never certain.
- Corporate withdrawal in fear of the possible destruction of public image, should the affair be given too much publicity.

- Refusal to cooperate with the media, which is viewed more as a commercial enterprise in search of a share of the news-market, than an organization at the service of the public.
- Rejection of the idea of “the media being a law unto itself” (acting outside the framework within which regulations can be made), can act with complete impunity.

*Diagnosis No. 3:* Tensions which develop in crisis situations often produce great hesitancy about how communication with the public should be handled. The strategy of dissimulation, apparently the easiest, might well be highlighted in the future on occasions where one is suddenly struck by the gravity of the stakes of major risk.

I would suggest that, in this era of major risk, there can be no viable currency without some confidence and trust amongst the various parties involved. This trust can not be acquired overnight. The longer masked practices continue, the greater their destructive consequences. But options and practices cited in preceding pages are not created spontaneously. They find their roots in the “mentality” of organizations.

#### *Crisis Situations And The Mentality Of Organizations*

The mentalities—reflexes, education, values—which impregnate big organizations greatly determine what forms of communication are practiced. In crisis situations, when tensions are rising, the weight of internal mentalities is felt more palpably than ever. Two traits of this mentality appear regularly in the cases studied:

- The incapacity of officials to openly doubt technology and its efficacy. The very mention of incertitude causes immediate and deep anguish in those in charge.
- The incapacity to weave relationships with any person from outside the organization. Any question coming from outside is treated with misplaced aggression and extreme suspicion.

Technological doubts arising through reflexion, are not necessarily a sign of “betrayal” of science. The complexity of our present systems, of representations and analyses demand a departure from anachronistic attitudes of the nineteenth century. However, attempts at gaining technical clarity are frequently considered unacceptable in organizations. Final technical diagnoses are sometimes made without inquiry and stamped, “For Company Eyes Only.” This secrecy seems to immobilise even officials at the very highest levels.

Until recently organizations have drawn on their strengths (their expertise, finances, political power etc.) in order to compensate for their weaknesses in communication. But the nature of present day risks and the increasing level of destruction requires deep reflexion. There is no guarantee that scenarios which have been competently handled in the past, can be coped with in the future. People’s public spiritedness—an essential asset in truth-seeking—is a most fragile commodity.

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