Course Learning Outcomes for Unit I

Upon completion of this unit, students should be able to:

1. Define crisis.

2. Define risk.

3. Explain the stages of a crisis and the requirements for appropriate crisis communication during each stage.

4. Analyze the required steps for successful written or verbal communication, including related theories.

5. Discuss how the type of risk and audience risk perception impacts communication.

6. Compare and contrast appropriate risk and crisis communication messages for various audiences and risk/crisis situations.

Reading Assignment

*Risk and Crisis Communications: Methods and Messages:*

Chapter 1:
Introduction

Chapter 2:
General Concepts of Risk and Crisis Communications

Chapter 3:
Communication Fundamentals and Theoretical Foundations

Unit Lesson

There are various definitions for the terms risk and crisis; however, in general, the term crisis refers to a major event with a potential negative effect on the organization, its stakeholders, products, or services. Crises are serious or catastrophic events, which are often times a turning point for the organization and its leaders, particularly if handled improperly. Crises are unpredictable in nature; however, not necessarily unexpected.

Risk is a combination of two factors: 1) the probability, or likelihood, that an adverse event will occur, and 2) the consequences of that adverse event (for example, the severity of illness or injury that may be caused by the incident). An adverse event is an outcome of some action caused by the organization.

In both risk and crisis situations, communication is essential to bring about a successful outcome or at least minimize the damage from an event. This unit focuses on general concepts of risk and crisis communication and fundamentals to help leaders in risk or crisis situations appropriately communicate with important stakeholders and the public.

Keep in mind, there are differences between risk and crisis communications. “Risk communication is an ongoing process that helps to define a problem and solicit involvement and action before an emergency occurs” (Walaski, 2011, p. 9). Notice that risk communication takes place before an incident happens. Risk communication is an interactive process that occurs over a period of time. Crisis communications, on the other hand, take place when the event is about to occur or is already occurring. The goal of crisis...
communication is to inform the audience or keep them safe, and is typically a one way message. The time available to develop the goals and objectives for crisis communication messages is extremely short, so leaders must be prepared to act quickly.

Understanding the stages of a crisis will improve your knowledge of how crisis communication messages are best crafted and delivered. Fink’s four stages of a crisis (Walaski, 2011) include the following:

1. **Prodromal**: During this stage organizations should be able to identify hints and detect that a crisis is about to happen. Some organizations claim that a crisis occurred without warning; however, most crisis experts agree that there are very few crises that do not provide clues if an organization is watching and looking for them.

2. **Crisis breakout**: This stage begins with an identifiable event that produces damage, either physical or reputational, to the organization.

3. **Chronic**: Here the organization attempts to address the ongoing effects of the crisis. The length of this stage can vary greatly depending on the activities of the organization.

4. **Resolution**: This is when the organization determines the events are no longer problematic. The effects of the crisis may linger for an extended period of time, but the immediate or most dangerous effects have been resolved.

Both leaders and followers are stressed during a crisis, so the potential for miscommunication increases. To minimize miscommunication, it is necessary for organizations to develop a clear understanding of why it is communicating, the purpose, and what it hopes to achieve. The success level of communications increases through understanding the audience and tailoring messages to the audience’s needs at each stage of the crisis.

According to the CERC model (Reynolds & Earley, 2010), a leader’s first message to stakeholders in a crisis should contain the following:

- An expression of empathy
- Confirmed facts
- What is known about the situation
- What the process entails
- Statement of commitment
- Where people can go for more information

Initial communication, during the first stages of a crisis breakout should be short, concise, and focused. Do not start with a lot of background information; stick to relevant information only. Avoid technical jargon and condescending or judgmental phrases. Do not provide any promises or guarantees, except for what you are certain you can deliver. Early in the crisis, a leader’s behavior and the messages delivered frame the crisis for both employees and the public. If messages are inconsistent, people will lose trust and begin to question information and recommendations. Leaders should not hold back information as a way to manage a crisis. We are now living in the information age and information will get out, either directly or through a back door. Holding back information implies guilt, arrogance, and dishonesty. So the faster bad news is given, the better.

Remember, acting trustworthy is foundational to crisis and emergency risk communication.

In addition to the stage of a crisis, the audience is also impacted by their perception of the risk involved. The reversibility, origin, or their personal stake in the crisis influences their perception and acceptance of the implications. In some situations the audience wants advice and answers they cannot find on their own. In other situations they want information to make their own decisions about what to do, or they may just need the process and framework to understand the crisis at hand. Organizations should expect greater public outrage and higher demands for information if what caused the risk or crisis is manmade, personally impacts them, or was a result of negligence.

To help visualize these concepts, think of the BP Oil spill and fire in the Gulf Coast in relation to the stages of a crisis and audience risk perception. Do you remember the public outrage as the crisis broke out? Many felt that BP leadership overlooked warning signs or did not put acceptable preventative measures in place to
prevent this crisis. It took an extended period of time for the organization to devise solutions and to communicate those during the breakout and chronic stages of this crisis. And even now, during the resolution stage, BP is continuing to communicate with the public regarding progress for environmental and economic issues resulting from the incident.

References:


Suggested Reading

The Four Stages of Highly Effective Crisis Management

Section V Introduction: Communication—Rules and Tools

Chapter 24:
Why Communicate in a Crisis?

Chapter 25:
What to Communicate?

Please click here to access the article below. It can also be found in the CSU Online Library.


Learning Activities (Non-Graded)

Review the following video and press release links from the BP oil spill.

1. BP Tony Hayward ‘Sorry’ Ad Original Version Exclusive: 
   http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_AwD_7yNzKo

2. Committed to the Gulf. Committed to America: http://www.youtube.com/user/BPplc?v=qHjqQFAu-8c

Identify and document which of the above correspond to the Breakout, Chronic, and Resolution stages of the BP Oil crisis. Describe the focus of BPs communication during each of these stages, noting how this focus changes as they progress through each of the stages.

After reviewing the three videos, check your analysis with the responses below.

Video 1: Press release from BREAKOUT stage of the crisis.

This press release states the facts of the crisis and specifically outlines the steps BP is taking to get the crisis under control. Notice the detail with regard to the description of resources the company is committing to address the emergency. The focus of this communication is on containment of the crisis and informing stakeholders as to the status and steps taken to avert any further damage.

Video 2: Video clip from the CHRONIC stage of the crisis.
In this video, the CEO of BP personally apologizes to the public for the crisis. The communication specifically addresses the impact of the crisis on the people of the Gulf Coast and describes the specific steps BP has taken and will take to resolve the crisis. The focus here is that BP has taken responsibility for the effects of the crisis and is empathetic with the people in the region. The reputation of the organization is still at stake during this stage and communications attempt to protect their reputation.

Video 3: Commercial from the RESOLUTION stage of the crisis.

In this commercial, an Operations Manager from BP states the crisis has been addressed and resolved. The main message here is: the beaches are open and we have learned how to produce energy more safely. The focus has shifted from facts of the event and efforts to contain the harmful events to the outcome and resolution. BP wants the public to know that they are using this crisis to impact their long term operations in an attempt to build continued trust for the organization.

Non-graded Learning Activities are provided to aid students in their course of study. You do not have to submit them. If you have questions, contact your instructor for further guidance and information.

Key Terms

1. Crisis
2. Crisis and Emergency Communication (CERC)
3. Crisis communication
4. Crisis management
5. Risk
6. Risk Communication