Course Learning Outcomes for Unit II

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

1. Explain the first two stages of typical media crisis reporting, including the characteristics of each stage and what to expect.

2. Describe “news values” (or news criteria) that determine how much prominence a news story is given.

3. Select appropriate crisis communication actions for the “fact finding” stage of media reporting.

4. Select appropriate crisis communication actions for the “unfolding drama” stage of media reporting.

Reading Assignment

The Four Stages of Highly Effective Crisis Management:

Section II Introduction:
Stages of a Crisis

Chapter 7:
Stage One—Fact-Finding Stage

Chapter 8:
Beware the ST Factor: Remember the Context

Chapter 9:
Stage Two—Unfolding Drama

Unit Lesson

The news media are influential in shaping how the public thinks and feels about an organization’s reputation, values, and actions. How the media are managed can either hurt or help in a crisis.

This unit will introduce you to the distinct, predictable patterns of how media react and report a crisis. Understanding these patterns can help organizational leaders plan better and stay ahead of the game during a crisis situation. Smart and speedy communication, particularly during the first two stages described in Chapters 7 and 9, will help leaders manage the media coverage and mitigate damage to their reputation.

There are a few key news ingredients which determine how much prominence a news story is given. These include:

- Impact
- Timeliness
- Currency
- Proximity
- Novelty
- Prominence
The more of these criteria that are present, the higher the news value, and the more likely the story will be a lead story for days. Leaders should be aware of these criteria as they plan their communications, especially during the breaking news stage of a crisis (Walaski, 2011).

The media report a crisis in four discernible stages (Jordan-Meier, 2011, p. 44):

1. **Stage One:** Fact Finding
2. **Stage Two:** Unfolding Drama
3. **Stage Three:** Blame
4. **Stage Four:** Fallout/resolution

During Stage One, or the breaking news stage, the media are looking to confirm what happened. The focus is squarely on the crisis incident. This is when media talk to eyewitnesses, victims, and anyone who is willing to speak to find out information and facts. They may also turn to social media, such as Twitter, for eyewitness reports and other breaking news. Many of the questions asked will be speculative in nature. As the crisis is breaking, the media, acting in the public interest, will want to know that the public is safe and that the responsible organization is responding swiftly. The key lesson to remember during this first stage of crisis reporting is to only say what you know to be fact.

What typically happens during Stage One?

- Speculation, rumor, and misinformation may flourish.
- Panic is possible.
- Chatter on social media sites begins to spike.
- The phone lines are congested. (Jordan-Meier, 2011)

Expect the media to:

- Seek the facts. (What is true/What is rumor?)
- Assess the impact. (How big of a deal is this?)
- Gauge implications. (So what?)
- Start to speculate on the cause. (Who is responsible?) (Jordan-Meier, 2011)

What to do in Stage One:

- Act fast.
- Take responsibility.
- Demonstrate concern and empathy.
- Collect facts and dispel rumors.
-Activate a crisis communication plan.
- Appoint your spokespersons and decide key message.
- Call in expert support. (Jordan-Meier, 2011)

One of the most important things a leader can do during the break out stage of a crisis is to inform employees regularly. Employees will talk often and to lots of people, so it is important that they are informed with correct, accurate information about what happened and what steps are being taken to address the crisis at hand (Jordan-Meier, 2011).

During Stage Two, or the unfolding drama stage, the focus shifts from the incident itself to the organization’s response and to the victims. The initial facts about the crisis are now out for public debate and discussion. People want to know what has happened to the victims and how the incident was handled. The expectation is that the media will tell the public what went wrong, who was responsible, and what might happen in the future. The media will also “dig for dirt,” especially if they think that someone is hiding something, and they will “issue link” back to previous events.
What typically happens during Stage Two?

- Media ask hypothetic questions and seek someone to blame.
- Judgment begins.
- The crisis goes viral and spreads on the internet and social media.
- “Unofficial” spokespeople talk and comment. (Jordan-Meier, 2011)

Expect the media to:

- Look for answers (to How? and Why?)
- Analyze (how the organization is handling the situation.)
- Compare the crisis (with similar situations.)
- Scrutinize the organization’s response.
- Call in the “experts” (particularly on CNN and other big cable networks.) (Jordan-Meier, 2011)

What to do in Stage Two:

- Put the incident in context and provide the “big picture.”
- Keep the media updated on actions the organization has taken and plans to take.
- Assess spokespeople.
- Assess messages.
- Anticipate what else the media might dig up.
- Monitor the Internet very closely.
- Monitor employee feelings and attitudes; address concerns quickly. (Jordan-Meier, 2011)

If Stage Two is handled well, then the organization may be able to skip Stage Three, the mudslinging stage. The key lesson for Stage Two is to understand the power of social media and to find and connect with your unofficial spokespeople. Think about how people rallied at social media sites after Hurricane Katrina or the earthquake in Haiti (Jordan-Meier, 2011).

References:


**Suggested Reading**


(This resource is listed on p. 265 of the Jordan-Meier textbook.)

**Key Terms**

1. Breaking news
2. Issue link
3. News values
4. Unfolding drama