

Communication and Attributions in a Crisis: An Experimental Study in Crisis Communication

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This study provides a partial test of a symbolic approach to crisis management. The symbolic approach examines the strategies used to respond to crises. The study concentrated on the match between crisis type and crisis response strategy. An experimental design was used to explore how crisis type, organization performance history, and crisis response were associated with the image of an organization. Additional analyses explored how causal attributions varied according to crisis type. For the cases tested, the results supported the use of the crisis response strategies recommended by the symbolic approach. The results of the experiment supported the basic assumptions of the approach. The implications and directions for future investigations using the symbolic model are discussed.

In 1988, Benson challenged crisis communication researchers to examine communication more closely. His challenges included discovering the range of crisis response/communication strategies organizations use in a crisis and finding the crisis response strategy or strategies best suited for a particular crisis type (Benson, 1988). The ensuing 7 years have produced a small but growing body of literature that emphasizes the communicative aspect of crisis management. Works by Allen and Caillouet (1994), Benoit (1992), Hobbs (1995), and Ice (1991) have helped to meet Benson's challenge to discover the range of crisis response strategies. A fairly detailed set of crisis response strategies has been identified. Benson's second challenge has gone largely unmet.

Very little attention has been given to matching crisis response strategies to crisis types (Coombs, 1995; Hobbs, 1995). The second challenge builds on the first: An array of crisis response strategies must exist before they can be matched to crisis types. One way to meet Benson's (1988) matching challenge is to develop theory-based explanations for why certain crisis response strategies should be used to address certain crisis situations. Attribution theory has been posited as one viable explanatory tool (Coombs, 1995; Jablonski, 1994). Neoinstitutionalism is another possibility (Allen & Caillouet, 1994). This article reports the results of an exploratory study designed to test the merit of attribution theory and neoinstitutionalism in explaining the match between crisis response strategies and crisis types.

CONTEXT OF THE STUDY

A crisis can be viewed as a threat to an organization (Allen & Caillouet, 1994; Barton, 1992). The threat reflects the potential of a crisis to do reputational (image) damage. The key reputational concerns are trustworthiness and the organization's ability to conform to the social expectations of stakeholders (DiMaggio & Powell, 1991). In turn, reputational damage can be translated into financial damage and even threaten the organization's survival. Crisis response strategies seek to protect an organization by eliminating or reducing reputational damage (Allen & Caillouet, 1994). Communication can be used to influence how stakeholders interpret a crisis and the organization in crisis.

Because communication should be important in a crisis, the first challenge was to identify an array of crisis response strategies (Benson, 1988). Researchers have drawn upon apologia, response to embarrassment, and impression management to develop crisis response strategies (Allen & Caillouet, 1994; Benoit, 1992; Hobbs, 1995; Ice, 1991).¹ Once lists were developed, the concern shifted to understanding how the crisis response strategies should be used (Benson, 1988).² Two theories help to organize the relation between crisis response strategies and crisis situations: neoinstitutionalism and attribution theory.

Neoinstitutionalism

Neoinstitutionalism is predicated on the concept of organizational legitimacy. An organization is granted legitimacy if stakeholders believe an organization is good

¹See Allen and Caillouet (1994) and Hobbs (1995) for recent discussions of crisis response strategies.

²Apologia provides a limited explanation of the relation between crisis type and crisis response strategy. The apologia strategies are just a part of the crisis-response strategy array. The more complete list of crisis response strategies requires movement beyond just the prescriptions derived from apologia. Recent studies show the limits of apologia for explaining crisis responses, such as Huxman and Bruce (1994).

and/or has a right to continue operations (Allen & Caillouet, 1994; Bedeian, 1989). Legitimacy is built by conforming to the social rules and expectations established by stakeholders. Moreover, legitimacy is critical to the successful operation of an organization (DiMaggio & Powell, 1991). A crisis is a threat or challenge to an organization's legitimacy—stakeholders question if an organization is meeting normative expectations. An organization will use communication strategically as a response to legitimacy threats because corporate discourse does shape how stakeholders view an organization (Allen & Caillouet, 1994; Marcus & Goodman, 1991).

The crisis response strategies can be used to (a) show the challenge is invalid, or (b) attempt to get stakeholders to judge the crisis more mildly and evaluate the organization more positively (Allen & Caillouet, 1994). From the neoinstitutional perspective, organizations should favor the use of crisis response strategies that reflect efforts to re-establish legitimacy. "Neoinstitutional research consistently indicates corporate actors use mechanisms and procedures to convey conformity with their institutional environment to enhance legitimacy and survival chances" (Allen & Caillouet, 1994, p. 48). Organizations must shift the focus from the violation of social norms (the crisis) to efforts designed to repair the violation. If a crisis cannot be shown to be invalid, crisis managers should use strategies that show how the organization has returned to the norms held by its stakeholders.

Attribution Theory

One consistent theme in communication research is that situations influence the selection of communication strategies (Bitzer, 1968; Black, 1965; Metts & Cupach, 1989; Ware & Linkugel, 1973; Wilson, Cruz, Marshall, & Rao, 1993). In fact, apologia and response to embarrassment, two sources for crisis response strategies, are deeply rooted in the notion that situations influence communication strategy selection (Hobbs, 1995; Kruse, 1986; Sharkey & Stafford, 1990). It becomes reasonable to assume that the crisis situation should affect the selection of crisis response strategies. Attribution theory is a useful framework for explaining the relation between a situation and the selection of communication strategies.

Research demonstrates that people search for causes of events in a variety of domains (Weiner, Perry, & Magnusson, 1988). McAuley, Duncan and Russell (1992) identified four causal dimensions people might use when making attributions: stability, external control, personal control, and locus. Stability assesses if the event's cause happens frequently (stable) or infrequently (unstable). External control indicates whether or not the event's cause is controllable. Personal control assesses whether or not the event's cause is controllable by the actor. Locus reflects if the event's cause is something about the actor or something about the situation (McAuley et al., 1992; Russell, 1982; Wilson et al., 1993).

Research consistently demonstrates a substantial overlap between personal control and locus. It is suggested that the two causal dimensions be taken as one dimension (Wilson et al., 1993). Both personal control and locus reflect intentionality of an act. High personal control and a locus in the actor create perceptions of intentional actions while low personal control and a locus in the situation foster perceptions of unintentional action. Although measures have been developed for four dimensions (McAuley et al., 1992), functionally there are three causal dimensions: stability, external control, and locus/personal control (locus for short).

The judgments people make about these three causal dimensions influence their feelings and behaviors toward the actor (Weiner, 1985; Weiner et al., 1988; Wilson et al., 1993). The explanations that actors offer for an event can affect people's attributions in two ways. First, the messages can shape how people perceive the three attribution dimensions. Second, the messages can affect the feelings created by the attributions (Weiner et al., 1988). Communication can be used in attempts to influence a person's attributions, or the subsequent feelings attached to those attributions.

Logically, a crisis is an event for which people or publics seek causes and make attributions. More specifically, people evaluate organizational responsibility for a crisis when they determine the cause of a crisis. The more publics attribute crisis responsibility to an organization, the stronger the likelihood is of publics developing and acting upon negative images of the organization. Greater attributions of responsibility lead to stronger feelings of anger and a more negative view of an actor's image (Weiner, Amirhan, Folkes, & Verette, 1987).

The three causal dimensions of attribution should affect evaluations of organizational responsibility for a crisis in predictable ways. Organizational crisis responsibility should be perceived as strongest if the cause is stable (i.e., the organization has a history of crises), external control (controlled by others outside the organization) is low, and the locus is strongly internal (intentionality is high). When a crisis event is repeated (stable), publics are more likely to attribute responsibility to the organization. Attributions of low external control indicate that the crisis was not under the control of groups outside of the organization; thus, the crisis should not be attributed to external agents. Attributions that entail a strong internal locus/intentionality suggest that the organization could have done something to prevent the crisis. Such attributions indicate that the organization could have prevented the crisis and knew that preventative measures could have been taken.

Organizational crisis responsibility should be weakest when attributions suggest the cause is unstable (i.e., the crisis is an exception in the organization's performance history), with strong external control and weak internal locus (low intentionality). Attributions reflecting strong external control and low intentionality (weak internal locus) suggest that factors outside the organization and its control are responsible for the crisis event. An unstable crisis creates weak attributions of

organizational responsibility. Such conditions suggest that an organization was a victim of circumstances and could do little or nothing to prevent the crisis.

One objective of crisis management is to prevent or lessen reputational damage to an organization (Barton, 1993; Pearson & Mitroff, 1993; Sturges, 1994). Attributions of organizational crisis responsibility should precipitate reputational damage. The attributions created by the publics could lead to anger and a negative image of the organization. In turn, the negative image colors future interactions between the organization and its publics. If communication can alter publics' causal attributions or affect feelings generated by these attributions, crisis response strategies could be used to reduce reputational damage.

Integrating the Perspectives: The Symbolic Approach

Neoinstitutionalism and attribution theory can be merged to form a symbolic approach to crisis management. The term *symbolic* is used because the emphasis is on how communication strategies (symbolic resources) are used in attempts to protect organizational images. The two perspectives share a belief that communication helps to shape an organization's image and that a crisis response should be linked to the type of crisis situation.

Neoinstitutionalism and attribution theory suggest three means by which crisis strategies might affect an organizational image:

1. Convince stakeholders there is no crisis.
2. Have stakeholders see the crisis as less negative.
3. Have stakeholders see the organization more positively.

If there is no crisis, there is neither a threat to legitimacy nor a reason to attribute responsibility for a crisis. A crisis manager could deny a crisis event occurred or clarify the situation to prove the situation does not constitute a crisis (Allen & Caillouet, 1994; Benoit, 1995). However, there must be some concrete evidence within the supposed crisis situation that allows the crisis manager to build a case for there being no crisis (Newsom, Scott, & Turk, 1992).

A crisis event is subject to interpretation. Crisis managers might try to get stakeholders to judge the crisis less negatively. A crisis manager might emphasize the organization's lack of responsibility for a crisis or the minimal damage created by a crisis (Allen & Caillouet, 1994; Benoit, 1995). In either case, a crisis manager attempts to place distance between the organization and responsibility for the crisis event. However, there must be some element within the crisis situation that indicates limited responsibility or minimal damage does exist.

A final option is to address the organizational image. Crisis managers might try to get stakeholders to judge the organization more positively. Stakeholders might

be reminded of good things the organization has done in the past (ingratiation) and/or show that the organization is taking some kind of remedial action (e.g., offer compensation to victims or create new practices to prevent a crisis event from repeating). The remedial action helps to re-establish legitimacy by demonstrating organizational concern for societal norms (Allen & Caillouet, 1994). Crisis managers should take the remedial route when no evidence exists either to deny a crisis or to distance the organization from the crisis.

Crisis response strategies can be divided into five groups: denial, distance, ingratiation, mortification, and suffering. Denial claims there was no crisis or the blame for the crisis is not the organization's. Distance accepts the crisis, but tries to weaken the link between the organization and the crisis. Ingratiation seeks to win public approval of the organization. Mortification tries to gain forgiveness for the organization. Suffering portrays the organization as a victim in the crisis (Allen & Caillouet, 1994; Benoit, 1995; Coombs, 1995). See [Coombs \(1995\)](#) for a more detailed discussion of the crisis response strategies.

Crisis response strategy selection should be related to the crisis situation. A need arises for a category system of crisis types, which then can be tied to crisis response strategies. Attribution theory provides a theory-based category system that allows for such linkages. External control and intentionality provide orthogonal dimensions that can be crossed to form a 2×2 matrix. External control can be divided into internal and external. Internal refers to a crisis caused by something the organization itself did. External refers to the crisis being created by some agents outside of the organization. Intentionality is divided into intentional and unintentional. Intentional refers to some actor committing the crisis act purposefully, and unintentional means the crisis event was not committed purposefully.

The matrix yields four crisis types:

1. Accidents: unintentional and internal
2. Transgressions: intentional and internal
3. Faux pas: unintentional and external
4. Terrorism: intentional and external

Characteristics of the crisis situation should suggest to the crisis manager the best crisis response strategy or strategies to fit the situation. Accidents are unintentional. Terrorism is intentional by some outside actor, but is not intentionally done by the organization. For these crisis types, a crisis manager can emphasize the unintentional dimension in his or her response. Such strategies should intensify attribution of unintentionality, thus reducing organizational responsibility for the crisis. Any of the strategies designed to create distance (i.e., excuses and justification) should be appropriate. Moreover, terrorism permits the organization to build sympathy by portraying itself as a victim. Stakeholder sympathy can help to build a more positive

view of the organization (Benoit, 1992). The crisis manager would use a strategy that emphasized shared suffering with victims.

A faux pas is ambiguous as to whether or not a crisis exists. Some external group claims the organization has done something wrong. The ambiguity provides an opportunity to convince stakeholders there is no crisis. Denial strategies would be most useful for faux pas. Transgressions are intentional and provide no recourse but to address the organizational image. The only viable option is to improve perceptions of the organization. Neoinstitutionalism recommends boosting an image by repairing legitimacy. An organization must show how it is returning to the adherence of stakeholder expectations. Remedial strategies should be useful for transgressions.

Each crisis type can vary along the stability dimension. A one-time crisis should be perceived as unstable and less intentional. A repeated crisis should be perceived as stable and more intentional (Griffin, 1994). If a crisis keeps happening, stakeholders begin to think it can be avoided. The end result of the attribution theory-based crisis situation category system is a list of crisis types and the crisis response strategy or strategies that best fit the crisis type. See [Coombs \(1995\)](#) for a more thorough discussion of this matching process.

Hypotheses (Hs)

This study is designed to test a portion of the symbolic perspective. Accident and transgression crisis types are examined along with whether the crisis happened once or multiple times and the effect of different types of crisis response strategies on organizational image. The symbolic perspective assumes that accidents and transgressions vary in terms of intentional attributions, but not external attributions. Moreover, crisis type should not affect stability attributions. Stability should be a function of the number of times a crisis type has occurred, not the type of crisis.

- H1: Participants' attributions of the transgression crisis condition will exhibit a stronger internal locus (i.e., be perceived as more intentional) than will the accident crisis condition.
- H2: Participants' attributions of the accident crisis condition and the transgression crisis condition will not differ in terms of the external control and stability dimensions.

Four crisis types were used in this study: one-time accident, repeated accident, one-time transgression, and repeated transgression. A matched crisis response strategy should better protect an image than either no response strategy or just any response (mismatched response). It is the strategic, not random use of communica-

tion that protects an organizational image from damage (Allen & Caillouet, 1994). The symbolic approach posits that a matched crisis response strategy should protect an image better than just providing information or randomly selecting any other crisis response strategy. Table 1 lists the four crisis types and the matched response strategies used in this study.

According to Table 1, a distance strategy is proper for a one-time crisis whereas a remedial strategy is proper for a repeated crisis, a one-time transgression, and a repeated transgression.

- H3: Participants in the matched response condition will hold more positive organizational images than those in the no response or mismatched response condition.

Both crisis type and performance history should influence the organizational image. Transgression crisis types should be associated with more negative organizational images than accident crisis types. Because organizations have more control over transgressions than accidents and transgressions are more intentional, transgressions are more likely to tarnish an organization's image. Performance history is one manifestation of stability. When an organization has a history of crises, an individual crisis should be perceived as more stable than a crisis that has happened only once. The greater the perceived stability of a crisis, the stronger perceptions of organizational responsibility should be (Griffin, 1994). The more publics perceive an organization as responsible for a crisis, the stronger a crisis's negative impact on the organization should be.

- H4: Participants in the accident crisis condition will hold more positive images of the organization than participants in the transgression condition.
- H5: Participants in the more positive performance history condition will hold more positive images of the organization than participants in the poor performance history condition.

TABLE 1
Crisis Type and Crisis Response Matches

<i>Crisis Type</i>	<i>Crisis Response Strategy</i>
One-time accident	Distance: The organization claim there was no intention of doing harm—an excuse.
Repeated accident	Remedial: A form of mortification where the organization offers some form of compensation to the victims.
One-time transgression	Remedial
Repeated transgression	Remedial

METHODS

Participants

The respondents in this study were 116 undergraduate students enrolled in communication courses at a Midwestern university. About 43% were male and 57% were female. The respondents ranged in age from 18 to 48 years ($M = 22.49$, $SD = 2.49$).

Design and Materials

Drawing on the symbolic approach to crisis management, the experimental design included the manipulation of three factors: crisis type, performance history, and crisis response strategy. Two crisis types were used: accident and transgression. Both accidents and transgressions are results of internal factors rather than external factors. Plant operations and employee work routines exemplify internal factors, whereas bombings and protests represent external factors. The difference between accidents and transgressions is intentionality. Accidents are unintentional, while transgressions are intentional.

In the scenarios, each crisis was presented as either a one-time or multiple-time occurrence. A one-time occurrence reflects a more positive performance history (i.e., the crisis is an isolated incident), while a multiple-time occurrence reflects a more negative performance history (i.e., the crisis is one in a series of crisis events). This two-level manipulation was intended to reflect the organization's performance history.

Crisis type and performance history were crossed to create four basic crisis scenarios. The scenarios were based on actual, lesser known cases, but the information was adapted to fit the needs of the study. Descriptions of four separate cases were written. Next, one of three response types (no response, matched response, and mismatched response) was added to each of the four cases. The no response condition included just the case description with no mention of any organizational response beyond information about the crisis event. The matched response condition used a match between the crisis type and the crisis response strategy provided by the symbolic approach. A rectification strategy was appropriate for all but the one-time crisis. A distance strategy was proper for the one-time crisis case. The mismatched response condition also added a description of the organizational response. However, the mismatched response scenario used a crisis response strategy that was not recommended by the symbolic approach to crisis management. Thus, each of the four cases had three response options, resulting in a total of 12 crisis scenarios.

Measures

Respondents' perceptions of organization image were obtained by using a 10-item scale adapted from McCroskey's (1966) measure of character. Examples of items include: "The company is basically honest," "The company is not concerned with the well being of its publics," and "I do trust the organization to tell the truth about the incident." Responses were recorded on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). Character is not the perfect measure for image. It is preferable to identify key image dimensions and to have publics evaluate each dimension (Denbow & Culbertson, 1985). However, the need for consistency between scenarios prevented the use of such dimensional image measures in this study. Still, character is important to public relations because credibility is essential to the effective practice of public relations (Baskin & Aronoff, 1992).

The causal attributions about the crisis were assessed using the four scales developed by McAuley et al. (1992). The scales assess the following dimensions of attribution: the locus of causality, external control, stability, and personal control. Because locus of causality and personal control very much overlap, they were combined into one dimension (locus) for this study.³ The authors report that internal consistencies for each of the 3-item scales ranged from .60 to .92 (Cronbach's α). The stem for each attribution item was the same: "Is the cause(s) of the crisis something ..." Responses were recorded on a 9-point scale anchored by bipolar descriptors (e.g., changeable and unchangeable, manageable by the organization and not manageable by the organization, and others can regulate and others cannot regulate).

To assess the effectiveness of the experimental manipulations, seven items were created for the study to serve as the manipulation checks. One item corresponded to each dimension of the manipulations. There were two items for the crisis types (accident and transgression), two items for both types of performance history (one-time/good and multiple occurrence/poor), and three items corresponding to the response types (no response, matched, and mismatched responses). Responses were recorded on a 5-point scale, ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*).

Procedures

Each respondent completed two crisis scenarios and the accompanying measures. The scenarios were paired such that no respondent completed two similar scenarios.

³Personal control and locus were combined to form locus. This is consistent with Wilson et al. (1993). Moreover, personal control and locus correlated at .68 ($p < .01$) in this study, again suggesting that the two dimensions be combined.

Each measure was completed immediately after reading each scenario. The administration required about 25 min.

RESULTS

The reliability analysis of the image items produced an internal consistency of .82 (Cronbach's α). The 10 items were averaged to create the composite image measure. The reliability analysis of the attribution dimensions produced the following coefficients: locus/intention (locus of causality and personal control combined), .84; external control, .57; and stability, .44 (Cronbach's α). Compared to the work of McAuley et al. (1992), two of these reliabilities were lower than expected and especially make problematic the analysis of the stability attribution. For external control and stability, the three items were averaged to create two of the three composite attribution measures. The third and final composite attribution measure is composed of the three locus of causality and three personal control items.

Manipulation Checks

To assess the effectiveness of the experimental manipulations, a series of one-way analyses of variance (ANOVAs) were performed. To assess perceptions of crisis type, accidents and transgressions were compared on an item assessing perceptions of the organization's intentionality, $F(1, 275) = 27.78, p < .0001$, and an item assessing perceptions of the preventability of the crisis, $F(1, 275) = 64.20, p < .0001$. As expected, significant differences were observed, with participants rating transgressions as more intentional and accidents as less preventable.

To assess perceptions of the two levels of organization performance history, two items (one indicating that the crisis was a one-time occurrence and one reflecting that it was a multiple-time occurrence) were examined. The results indicated significant differences for both items, $F(1, 275) = 299.16, p < .0001$ and $F(1, 275) = 179.87, p < .0001$.

To examine perceptions of the organization's response to the crisis situations, three items assessing each of the response types were examined. The first response item asked if the organization in the scenario provided any statement about the crisis. This item tested for differences between the no response condition and the two response conditions. The second and third response items assessed if the organization made any changes in its procedures and practices after the crisis. The mismatched responses all involved no changes being made and the organization reaffirming current operations. The matched responses all involved making changes in procedures or practices (the mortification strategy). The second response

item asked if no changes were made while the third response item asked if changes were made.

For the first response item, a significant difference emerged $F(2, 274) = 39.41$, $p < .001$. The Scheffé follow-up procedure ($p = .01$) indicated that the no response scenario was perceived as significantly different from both the matched and mismatched response scenarios. Participants rated the no response condition highest for not making any comment.

For the second response item, a significant difference emerged, $F(2, 274) = 103.63$, $p < .0001$, and the Scheffé procedure ($p = .01$) revealed significant differences between all three response types. Participants viewed the mismatched response condition as highest for not making changes and the matched response condition as lowest.

For the third response item, the results indicated a significant difference, $F(2, 274) = 63.72$, $p < .0001$, between the response types. The Scheffé procedure ($p = .01$) revealed significant differences among each of the three response types. Participants rated the matched response condition highest for making changes and the mismatched response condition lowest. Overall, the analysis of the manipulation check items indicated that the intended experimental manipulations were successful. Table 2 summarizes the analysis of the manipulation checks.

Test of Hs

To address H1 and H2, a series of three one-way ANOVAs were performed using crisis type (accident and transgression) as the independent variable and the three dimensions of attribution as the dependent variables. The analysis of the locus attributions indicated a statistically significant difference between accidents and transgressions $F(1, 275) = 66.66$, $p < .0001$. The locus was more internal for transgressions ($M = 7.69$) than for accidents ($M = 6.53$). These results indicate that respondents tended to perceive that transgressions were more likely to occur as a result of causes within the organization itself, although accidents were more likely to be perceived as occurring due to causes outside of the organization.

The analysis of the attributions reflecting external control (i.e., the extent to which the crisis was perceived to be under the control of other people outside of the organization) revealed no significant difference between accidents ($M = 5.25$) and transgressions ($M = 5.24$), $F(1, 275) = .85$, $p = .35$. Finally, the analysis of the stability attributions revealed no significant difference between accidents and transgressions $F(1, 275) = .60$, $p = .60$. Respondents' attributions of stability were similar among accidents ($M = 3.96$) and transgressions ($M = 4.18$). Overall, the results of the analyses provide support for both H1 and H2. Table 3 summarizes the analyses used to test H1 and H2.

TABLE 2
Manipulation Checks

	Crisis Type								
	Accident		Transgression						
Variable	M	SD	M	SD	F	df	p		
Intentionality of the crisis	1.85	1.07	2.55	1.12	27.78	1, 275	<.0001		
Preventability of the crisis	3.33	1.12	4.37	1.02	64.20	1, 275	<.0001		
	Performance History								
	Positive		Negative						
Variable	M	SD	M	SD	F	df	p		
Crisis is a one-time event	4.56	.83	2.19	1.39	229.16	1, 275	<.0001		
Crisis is a repeated event	2.00	1.14	3.87	1.17	179.87	1, 275	<.0001		
	Organizational Response								
	None		Mismatched		Matched				
Variable	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	F	df	p
No statement beyond facts	2.68	.99	3.81	1.23	4.05	1.18	39.41	2, 274	<.001
No changes in procedures	3.31	1.01	3.85	1.10	1.74	.97	103.63	2, 274	<.001
Changes made in procedures	2.86	1.27	2.17	1.21	4.16	1.13	63.72	2, 274	<.001

TABLE 3
One-Way Analysis of Variance for Crisis Type
by Attribution Dimensions

Variable	Crisis Type				F	df	p	ns
	Accident		Transgression					
	M	SD	M	SD				
Locus	6.01	1.54	7.45	1.42	66.66	1, 275	<.0001	
External control	5.09	1.73	5.28	1.64	.85	1, 275		.35
Stability	4.25	1.26	4.16	1.55	.27	1, 275		.60

TABLE 4
Analysis of Variance for Image by Crisis Type, Crisis Response,
and Stability

Source	SS	df	ms	F	p	η^2
Total	224.23	230	—	—	—	
Crisis type	19.01	1	19.12	28.59	<.0001	
Crisis Response	12.04	2	6.02	9.06	<.0001	
Stability	39.64	1	39.64	59.61	<.0001	
Type $\times$ Response	.74	2	.40	.55		=.575
Type $\times$ Stability	1.41	1	1.41	2.12		=.147
Response $\times$ Stability	1.53	2	.77	1.15		=.318
Type $\times$ Response $\times$ Stability	1.59	2	.80	1.20		=.303
Residual	145.62	219	.65	—	—	

To examine H3, H4, and H5, organizational image was analyzed using a 2 (crisis type: accident vs. transgression) $\times$ 2 (crisis occurrence: one-time vs. multiple) $\times$ 3 (organizational response type: no response vs. matched response vs. mismatched response) ANOVA. As expected, the results revealed significant main effects for crisis type, $F(1, 230) = 28.59, p < .0001, \eta^2 = .12$, performance history, $F(1, 230) = 59.61, p < .0001, \eta^2 = .21$, and response type $F(2, 230) = 9.06, p < .0001, \eta^2 = .07$. Table 4 summarizes the ANOVA results. To assess pairwise differences among the three levels for the main effect for response type, the Scheffé follow-up procedure ($p = .05$) was performed. The results indicated that image assessments for the matched response ($M = 3.15$) differed significantly from both the no-response ($M = 2.63$) and the mismatched response ($M = 2.63$). H3, H4, and H5 were supported by the findings.

DISCUSSION

Communication can be a valuable resource for crisis managers. What organizations say to their various publics during a crisis should influence the extent of the reputational and financial damage a crisis can inflict on the organizational image. The symbolic approach to crisis management uses attribution theory and neoinstitutionalism as a means of explaining and predicting the dynamics between crisis response strategies and reputational damage. Publics will make attributions about the cause of a crisis. The more publics attribute responsibility for the crisis to the organization, the greater the risk should be of reputational damage (a threat to legitimacy is a part of the reputation). Crisis response strategies can lessen the reputational damage by mitigating the affective feelings generated by the attributions and/or altering the attributions themselves.

This study tested a portion of the symbolic approach to see how useful it is for crisis managers. H1 and H2 examined assumptions of how the accident and transgression crisis types differ and are similar to one another. As predicted, transgressions were perceived as having a stronger internal locus than accidents (greater intentionality). Transgressions are perceived as more intentional than accidents, because the organization is perceived to have greater control over a transgression than an accident. Moreover, the transgression and accident crisis types were perceived similarly in terms of external control: Both crises types were viewed as involving little control by external groups. These findings are consistent with the symbolic approach's categorization system that divides crisis types by the intentional-unintentional and internal-external dimensions. This is an important finding because the attributions are the basis for the link between the crisis response strategies and the crisis types.

H3 represents an attempt to meet Benson's (1988) matching challenge with the symbolic approach. Matched responses (crisis response strategies recommended by the approach) were related to more positive organizational images than either the no response or a mismatched response (strategy not recommended by the symbolic approach). Organizations suffered the least reputational damage when a matched crisis response strategy from the symbolic approach was used. This offers support to the matching of certain crisis response strategies to specific crisis types.

H4 and H5 provided partial evaluations of how the crisis types and performance history are related to organizational image. As predicted, the transgressions created greater reputational damage than the accidents. The link appears to be perceptions of organizational responsibility for the crisis. H1 found that participants perceive transgressions as having more intentionality than accidents. Organizations that might be perceived as being able to prevent a crisis should have a more negative image than an organization perceived to have little or no control over a crisis.

Support also was found for the connection between performance history and organizational image. Organizations with a history of many crises (poor performance history) were perceived more negatively than organizations reporting one crisis (positive performance history). Although H4 and H5 are very intuitive, they had to be tested to avoid researcher attribution error (Russell, 1982).

Limitations

There were several limitations to this study. The relatively low reliability for the stability attribution measure is problematic and limits interpretations of the results using this measure. The reliability of the external control measure also was somewhat low. Future research must develop reliable measures for these two variables in the crisis realm. Moreover, this study suffers from the weaknesses of any experimental design using college students as participants rather than actual publics involved in a crisis.

Implications and Future Research

This preliminary study offers support for the basic assumptions of the symbolic approach. The partial test of the crisis type categorization system found transgressions and accidents were similar and different as predicted by the two dimension categorization system. Further research is needed to extend the test to terrorism and faux pas, the two remaining crisis types in the symbolic approach.

The contributions of the symbolic approach to crisis communication were affirmed. The matched response condition was associated with more positive perceptions of organizational image than either the no response or the mismatched conditions. Future research should examine other matched responses posited by Coombs (1995) symbolic approach. Such studies would help to complete a basic test of the symbolic approach.

This study was an initial test of the symbolic approach to crisis management. Parts of the approach were tested and support found for the ideas. The crisis type categorization system worked as predicted for transgressions and accidents. The crisis type and performance history were related to reputational damage as predicted. Most importantly, the matched crisis response strategies from the symbolic approach were related more closely to a positive organizational image than either the no response or mismatched response conditions. The symbolic approach helps to meet Benson's (1988) matching challenge. The study indicates the symbolic approach is of value to crisis managers and worthy of continued study.

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