

ROLE OF COMMUNICATION IN CRISIS MANAGEMENT

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Abstract

Within the contemporary era, human and social entities are more and more confronted with difficulties when trying to maintain control over their own lives. Changes occur at such a rapid pace, with so profound consequences, that, in order to determine an advantageous future for the self, the individual, or the entire society has to estimate the current situation and make decisions almost instantly. An analysis of the crises evolution implies the analysis of the risks that led to the crisis appearance, which means that their management has to be accomplished within an integrated environment. As far as organizations are concerned, preventing and managing risks may only be done in case the crisis management is based on a coherent communication strategy in crisis situations. An efficient management of crises is that of an interactive type, and the communication policy belonging to it presupposes the existence of an integrated structure of public relations.

1. CRISIS, CONFLICT, RISK. TERMINOLOGICAL DELIMITATIONS

When belonging to the social, the term ‘crisis’ is one of the most frequently used words, it being tightly connected with situations of incertitude and/or discontinuity. The origin of the word traces back to the Greek ‘krisis’, based on the verb used in Old Greek, ‘krinein’, meaning, among others, ‘to judge, separate, discriminate’ but also ‘**to decide**’. The fact that, etymologically,

the term *crisis* refers to decision is interpreted, in its current use in the given context, as the role of decision in preventing indecision and incapacity of re-evaluation and re-interpretation of problems (seen as sources of crises), and which would jeopardize cohesion and functioning of a system or of an organization [1]. Yet, the mere decision does not imply the crisis management; the optimal management of crises constitutes an endeavor for the decision making factors of a system/ organization and includes complex issues and abilities such as the capacity of foreseeing crises, the anticipation of scenarios for the foreseen situation, the prompt answer in case of their appearance but also the following of strictly designed steps in solving the crisis. The term crisis can convert its meaning according to the field in which it is used, each of the areas of use conferring different significations. Thus, from the perspective of psychology, the crisis refers to the assembly of tensional phenomena that lead to a sudden and significant change; from the psychopathological point of view the crisis refers to situations of acute functional perturbation, due to the above mentioned significant psychological change; from the sociological perspective it reaches the issue of difficulties accumulation, of conflicting tensions release, presupposing the appearance of some pressure toward the change, while from the organizational approach, the crisis describes an unexpected situation, which brings to discussion the organization's responsibility toward its public and which threatens the organization's capacity of continuing its normal activity. All these perspectives regarding crisis attempt to include the events that affect various entities (from people to organizations), while the unanimously accepted term refers to *their abnormality status*.

From this perspective, correlated with the etymological meaning, the crisis may be understood as a factor able of inducing incapacity of decision, meanwhile, the functioning of the organization being either questioned or compromised. Different from crises, conflicts are regarded as dysfunctions, as well as opportunities, given the possibility of decision making in case of social

interactions, fact that finally leads to the annihilation of those dysfunctions that caused the conflict appearance. For Th. Pauchant [2], for example, the conflict represents a stage in crisis evolution, having some local event as its background, which affects the symbolical structure of an organization, but which does not necessarily affect the organization’s principles and fundamental values. The Pauchant diagram offers a linear analysis of crises, having its root in situations of ignored risk, following the pattern: incident → accident → conflict → crisis, as shown:

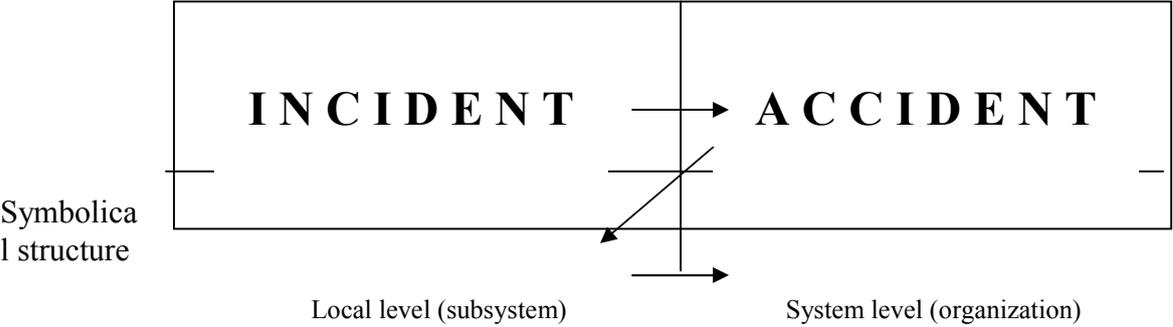


Fig.1 The Pauchant diagram of crises

Consequently, crisis, conflict and risk are terms that cannot be studied separately. And since most of the researchers consider conflict as a stage in a crisis development, the focus will be on the binomial risk – crisis, which induces a quasi- complete approach in the context of frequent transformations, of quality and quantity fluctuations within the contemporary society. In order to access the study of the complex issue of crises, the issue of risks needs to be approached as well. Actually, the present society exposes itself to unexpected changes, to qualitative leaps produced within a rather short time. In this respect, the risk management implies, according to Kenneth Watt, “preparing for the unimaginable” [3], a phrase that characterizes the fluctuating environment of society as a whole, the existing risk factors, and, especially, the capacity of preparing for crises management and the very management of such crises. Changes in our contemporary world take place at such alert paces, having such

profound consequences, that there is need for decision making almost instantly. Within organizations, the quasi-instant preparation of decision is not only the managers' responsibility, but also the people's specialized in counseling such situations, namely, the personnel from the public relations departments.

Within the dynamics context of our contemporary world, risk represents one of the engines of progress and it can be utilized for dysfunctions elimination. Not taking the risks preserves the possibility of crises to appear, whereas taking risks does not equal the disappearance of uncertainty, on the contrary, it leads to its amplification. From etymological point of view, the term "risk" is of uncertain origin, there are two manners of defining it, both of which send us to the idea of 'danger'. The etymons proposed by C. Veltcheff are the Latin *resecare* = *to raise by cutting*, and, respectively, *rixare* = *to argue*. The multiple etymology of the word should not be excluded. Worth mentioning is D. Duclos' analysis, from *Puissance et faiblesse du concept de risque*, published in *L'Année Sociologique*, 46, 1996, n°2: „*Venetian word of Spanish origin, the word ,risk' (riesgo) first describes the cliff in the water (resecum, in Latin), then the shipwreck, and then the potential danger for the shipowner, and finally, it absorbs more and more abstract notions regarding the probability of an unlucky event to take place*” [4].

The risk management has become a study discipline itself as a result of the research field evolution, starting from the area of the complex economy issues, where risk is perceived as the relation between the dimension of expected losses and the probability of losses appearance. Via this approach, a first relationing of risks with rational decision is made, more precisely, with the possibility of their quantitative definition, in order for them to be evaluated while suitable to a context; nevertheless, it is rather difficult to establish the objectivity of such measurement.

Being itself an element that characterizes the contemporary society, the risk also establishes the relationship between contemporaneity and the

possibility of crises appearance, that is, it enables the transfer between risk management and crisis management. Crisis becomes a study object within the contemporary society, the *'risk society'* [5], and implies a perturbation, a critical moment generated by the society's perpetual change and uncertainty, by the pace of innovations, by time and cost pressure, which do not allow an adequate scientific evaluation of risks, as well as by the tendency toward a greater individuality and toward an authoritative public opinion.

In fact, within the context of these newly designed coordinates of crisis study, starting from the issue of risks of the contemporary society, we should return to the crisis definition inside the organization, it being *"a period within a system dynamics, characterized by the accentuated accumulation of difficulties, the conflicting outburst of tensions, fact that will make difficult its normal functioning, thus, violent pressures toward change being released"* [6], respectively, to a more generous approach to crisis, where crisis involves *"an event, a revelation, an allegation or a set of internal and external problems that menace an individual's or an organization's integrity, reputation or even existence"* [7].

Coming back to the relationship risk–crisis, we shall now place the crisis management as a continuation of the risk management, or, better, we shall make it clear that the crisis management within an organization cannot start but with the risk management.

2. CRISIS MANAGEMENT

Crisis management is based on risk management, namely, on *"activities performed toward preventing and evaluating of events of various origins, without initiating prevention steps, but trying to diminish the chances of risk development, or by initiating protective steps, trying to reduce the risk effects"* [8]. However, in order to prevent undesired events from occurring, or to diminish their chances of appearance, it is necessary to build and manage an image of the organization, as a sum of all reference systems of the target public

or as a sum of all reference systems within the strategic interest group of the organization. Building the organization image is the responsibility of the public relations department and it takes time, phenomenon that may be synonymous with continuous communication. To make itself identifiable, the organization needs to emit messages regarding its functioning and its associated competence and responsibility.

Reviewing the entire approach, crisis management implies two previous stages: image building and managing and risk management, responsibilities that belong to the public relations structure.

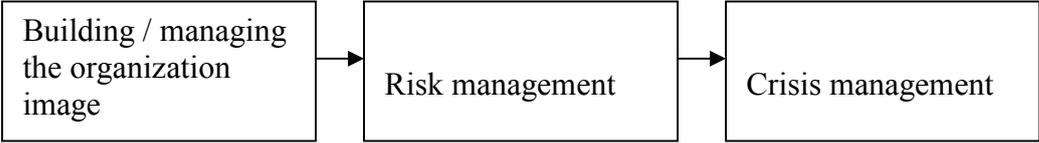


Fig.2 The position of crisis management within an organization strategy

This approach involves an integrated analysis of issues, both at decision - making level and at public relations level. For us to be able to accomplish this integrated approach, we have to analyze the life cycle of risks in direct connection with the conflict stages, as shown below:

Conflict stages (D.R. Forsyth)	disagreement	confrontation	escalation	de-escalation	solving
Crisis stages (Meng – Hainsworth)	potential crisis	emergent crisis	current crisis	latent crisis	
Crisis stages (Fink)	crisis preparation	acute crisis	chronic crisis	crisis end	
Capacity of action	possibility of influencing		difficulty in influencing		
Preponderant area of competence	risk management		crisis management		

Recommended type of management	proactive management	reactive management
	interactive management	

Table no.1 Crises taxonomies

Examining the conflict stages as shown by Donelson F. Forsyth, we discover that a disagreement implies the manifestation of differences, the existence of certain tensions (potential risk), a confrontation equals the intensification of differences (emergent risk), escalation is represented by real crisis situations, characterized by tensions, uncontrollable arguments, while the de-escalation and conflict solving are stages characterized by formal compulsions, by interventions for identifying a compromise and reaching an agreement, respectively, for eliminating animosities or reducing them to a controllable level of a latent crisis [9].

In M.B. Meng – Brad E. Hainsworth taxonomy [10], during the first stage of the risks lifecycle or the crisis origin, the crisis management presupposes the identification of tendencies that can result in a crisis. The tendencies identification becomes the responsibility of the team specialized in risk management (if that particular organization includes such a structure), or of the specialists belonging to programming and planning departments. During this stage, those events capable of inducing conflicting situations become visible. If risk is eradicated in its incipient phase, the organization's credibility increases, its image becomes clear and powerful. However, reaching such performance asks for a lot of experience and for an integrated public relations policy. Most of the organizations though, still neglect the source of conflict because they lack experience or are unable to face the unpredictable or to promote integrating policies.

The second stage, of emergent crisis, is characterized by groups formation, by individual differences deepening, by the appearance of mediation

or by an amplification of conflicting situations among groups, or individuals or between groups and individuals. On the other side, an increase in pressure from outside the organization is visible, as a result of the interference of those people who try to ‘identify’ the risk situation. During this stage, risk management has to be doubled by crisis management, because it is not too late to intervene or to influence decisions. The decision factors of an organization should intervene and play a mediating role, so as not to allow the conflict to become a crisis for which an increased effort for de-escalation would be necessary. These two initial stages, characterized by the possibility of influencing the course of actions, call for a proactive management (conflict mediation at this stage of confrontation asks for the use of proactive instruments). Throughout this stage, the public relations team should intervene, in order to plan communication in case of conflict worsening.

Crisis itself is dealt with within the third stage of Meng- Hainsworth taxonomy and it is illustrated as a series of events that threaten the integrity or image of an individual, of a group, or of the organization as a whole. Reaching this stage does not necessarily imply the presence of the previous two stages. The current crisis can appear suddenly, skipping previous steps, and this is possible because imminent risks can, at any time, lead to conflict escalation, and a crisis situation can result from the potential risk situation. The stage characterizes itself by the implementation of the reactive management steps, in case the proactive instruments proved inefficient in stopping the crisis evolution.

The final stage, of the latent crisis, involving at the same time the de-escalation of conflict and its solving, indicates the end of passing through the entire lifecycle of risks and the possibility of transforming the latent crisis into a potential crisis (the risk cannot be eliminated one hundred percent). The final stage is characterized by the public opinion’s and respectively, by the administrative structures’ (having decisive role in remodeling the normative frame) monitoring of possible identical risk situations, for the purpose of solving

similar risks , based on experience gained throughout a risk situation that went through all stages. This involves, first of all, establishing and applying policies in accordance with the risk evolution context.

Crisis management may be brought into discussion only starting with the third stage of the Forsyth, Ming- Hainsworth and Fink taxonomies, a stage in which the Crisis Communication Plan (CCP), previously designed, must be applied by all means, and it should reach the same target public as in case of the regular target of the company during their communication campaign. Within the same third stage there can be established the organization's degree of responsibility since "*an organization is considered to be responsible for a crisis in case the cause is internal, controllable and stable (repeated throughout time)*" [11]. Generally speaking, it is still during this stage when the settled crisis cell comes to stage, and it is specific to the particular critical situation confronted by the organization, even though it can act starting with the second stage of the risks lifecycle.

The carelessness of the organization's decision-making structure may lead to what is known as routine crisis, and further on, to an ampler development, from the potentiality stage of risks to the current crisis, via the emergent phase, and as a result of a faulty risk management. The faulty risk management is due to the lack of applying proactive instruments, in initial phases, such as control procedures, report systems, labor safety standards, signal detection, preparation/ prevention etc. On the other hand, the reactive instruments, implemented during the last two stages of the risk lifecycle, require crisis plans (Crisis Communication Plan – CCP; Crisis Management Plan – CMP etc.), a limitation of effects, a recovery period a.s.o. in case of an interactive policy, the crisis communication plan and the crisis management plan become reactive instruments, proactively applied, that is tested and applied during various simulations. The CMP consists of a series of specific steps that need to be followed under certain circumstances, the speed of reaction being an essential

element. It is crucial for an interactive policy to be applied through the above mentioned simulations, in order to prepare each member of the organization so that they could know exactly what to do and when to intervene. Throughout the third stage, the entire organization (or sector, or affected structure) must act and function as a team, starting from the top managing positions and ending with the operative personnel. The team-action style represents the application of the unitary action principle, and responsibilities in this area are also distributed to the crisis management teams, specifically to those people belonging to the decision making forum (at organization level or at the level of component structures). Each of the employees' responsibility is extremely important since any sensitive statements, in case of an organization affected by crisis, may lead to a worse crisis. This individual responsibility indicates the application of interactive crisis management instruments, which are visible throughout all the evolution stages of the entire risk lifecycle. By using the interactive management, the organization will be able to get over any hardships or difficulties and improve its own action style so as not to repeat the mistakes in case of a new crisis.

3. COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES IN CRISIS SITUATIONS

The communication strategy in crisis situations presupposes a general approach to communication in case of a crisis situation intensification and it belongs to a more complex type of communication, the public relations strategy of the organization in discussion. The outlining of this strategy has to take into consideration the area of definition for the public relations activities and for the basic rules used in operation. The very existence of this general approach does not restrict, nor does it determine, at the organization level, a certain type of behavior in its employees, but it offers rules of employment so that each of the employees will know his symbolic position within the organization and, respectively, will know which his area of responsibility is and thus, the final defined action of preparing the crisis communication will not degenerate into

some chaotic, dezorganized action. Last but not least, this strategy aims at each type of activity , in turn, therefore, each segment of the whole structure will be covered.

The public relations strategy, indeed, does not imply a rigid and sophisticated approach, on the contrary, it equals a passage, inside a dynamic frame of development and in the absence of panic, and its finality is meant to offer *clarity and efficiency*. The best public relations strategy will always be the initial one put into action, while, in order to accomplish this act, there is need for planning in a simulated workframe, as close as possible to a strategic reality. This planning of the public relations strategy constitutes the most difficult part of the entire process of strategic approach of the public relations area. Unfortunately, there are numerous confusions made between the public relations strategy and its necessary tactical steps and within many organizations, such confusions are visible. A strategy that is correctly planned does not limit itself to an algorithm of action, which is supposed to result from a plan of crisis communication or from a crisis management plan, but it has to be included in them. At the same time, a correctly planned strategy involves the concentration of all efforts, for a long period of time and its main objective must be the accomplishment of the desired results [12]. The strategic approach needs to be incorporated into documents showing the action path in gradual steps, namely, in tactical stages, according to the interactive crisis management, and such action requires careful planning or results from a specific decision made by the managers.

According to Benoit [13] , there are certain communication strategies in crisis situations: the negation strategy (by rejecting accusations); the responsibility denial (by declining chargeability with regard to certain events); the lessening of the dangerous action nature (by trying to obtain support, by reducing the negative sentiments, by differentiating, by transcending, attacking or compensating); the correction strategy (involving promises for the purpose of

restauration, recomposition etc.), and the humiliation strategy. According to Coombs [14], the communication strategies in crisis situations are classified into: negation, outstripping, partiality, humiliation and suffering. Once the action strategy has been established, the tactical steps need correlation with the action, based on logical sequencing; in other words, the solution to the problem (the analogical approach) must come into gradual steps (the digital approach), and respectively, for each of these steps, there must be specific objectives and action deadlines. The tactical steps claim a continuous evaluation, based on the established algorithm, and by means of either confronting the prognosticated data and the accomplished elements, or by checking reliability, in case of a new area of expertise.

Consequently, the public relations strategy of an organization is the framework under which all action plans are designed. The lack of such a strategy or its maladjustment to the real context makes difficult the possibility of designing an action plan in crisis situations and facilitates a rapid evolution of risks and their transformation from potential and emergent risks into current risks. The coherence of the public relations strategy confers the coherence of the action strategy in risk situations, although it also detains an important role in preventing/ avoiding emergent risks. Therefore, at the same time with the implementation and the design of the public relations strategy, the action lines in crisis situations are drawn, so that action could be applied unitarily and coherently, before the crisis team is established and any decisions are made. Further on, as far as the communication strategy in crisis situations is concerned, it will be designed in accordance with the public relations strategy, which means the latter has to take into account several elements necessary for a good functioning under similar conditions. Stavre [15] recommends the mentioning of several tactical approaches within the public relations strategy; these approaches should provide unity of action and viability to the organization while they should also be able to face the concrete reality by: providing a

reaction plan for potential crisis situations, in which all of the organization's structures should be involved; sustaining the crisis cell gathering and clarifying the existence of communication among the members of the organization; sustaining the application of the crisis management plan; checking the reliability of such a crisis management plan; updating the crisis management plan; training the crisis team and the decision making factors for a confrontation with the journalists; ensuring the coherence of press releases so as to avoid internal contradictions and to offer the framework for the one single voice principle implementation; communicating internally for the purpose of creating the framework within which the personal activity should be considered as part of the crisis management and not as opposed to this direction or independent of it; monitoring the crisis results in order to ameliorate the plans meant to prevent unforeseen situations. At the level of public relation strategy each variant of possible scenarios needs careful consideration in relation with the specific action plan (tactical steps).

Clearly, these directions, so easily reflected in tactical steps and designed at the same time with the public relations strategy, are to be found within the crisis plans as well (CCP and CMP). Nevertheless, such plans result directly from the crisis situations action strategy, a strategy that may be identical with the tactical steps necessary to be taken so as to obtain a unitary and coherent action, in case of an *ab initio* application of the *single voice* principle (unity of command - unity of action). Designed and established within the framework of the public relations strategy, the communication strategy in crisis situations modifies and is applied in accordance with the type of crisis and related to the capacity of risk prognosis of the planning team that has taken into consideration the possibility of its emergence. In case of such occurrences, one of the directions established by Benoit or Coombs is selected. The necessity of correlating the communication strategy in crisis situation with the public relations strategy also results from the necessity of a correct presentation of the

self-image, from knowing and respecting the others and from admitting of own mistakes [16].

Thus, the probable components of the crisis teams are planned prior to the crisis starting, depending on the assumed risk and the type of crisis it focuses on, while the teams need to “train” under specified conditions and take into consideration potential messages, simulate these messages transmission, and, respectively, they need to execute the tactical steps found in all crisis situations (for this purpose, there are references made regarding the common directions incorporated into the public relations strategy). Such a manner of action simplifies the designing of the crisis communication plan (CCP) since the involved personnel are already trained to solve certain aspects included in it, and they are already confronted with corresponding problems. Similarly, the identification of potential crises, the audience analysis, the naming of action teams, the training of communication teams under crisis situations, the designation of a spokesperson, the preparation of resources necessary for communication and the identification of the communication channels – all become previously known elements, able to make the team’s work easier whenever they attempt to manage a crisis. Other aspects, such as: the effective preparation of the press center, of handouts to include useful telephone numbers, the monitoring of the crisis, the post-crisis action taking or the evaluation – all of them may be performed subsequently, within the already established framework.

4. CONCLUSIONS

In the context of an interactive crisis management, the issue of communicating in crisis situations is facilitated by the possibility of offering the necessary official information and thus, the communicative pathology of rumor is prevented from being active. A communication team in crisis situations (constituted on the public relations frame and expert in the public relations

strategy) is able to meet an increased demand for information, it can ensure the implementation of the one single voice principle or communicate efficiently even though messages carry an increased emotional load, and it may benefit from the increased role of direct communication.

An efficient crisis management, well implemented, will be successful especially at the moment when, within the organization, the public relations are analyzed through an integrated model [17], which is capable to define and protect public relation from incongruent manifestations. An increased consideration toward the area of public relations ensures the organization immunization against potential risks to which it is exposed or, at least, the opportune “cure”, with no side effects, in case these risks become emergent.

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