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Introduction

Our world is increasingly complex. Companies and organizations are larger than ever and are tightly connected by complex and changing technologies and long supply chains. Daunting and complicated issues like climate change, population shifts and migration, and global political instability create very rapid and widespread change. Many critical resources such as water and energy are in increasingly short supply. Social, political, environmental, and economic conditions seem unstable and unpredictable. Ways of operating, doing business, making a living, interacting with others, and communicating are constantly evolving. The high level of complexity and change is matched by an escalating number and severity of emergencies, disasters, and crises.

Bad things are happening all the time, all around us. It seems like social media and old or legacy media are constantly reporting on a new threat, crisis, or disaster. Severe weather (e.g., hurricanes, tornadoes, blizzards, floods, heat waves, and droughts) occurs throughout the United States and around the world. Most climate scientists predict more extreme weather because of global climate change. Spills of toxic materials (e.g., oil, industrial chemicals, sewage, and even radiological material) are increasingly common. Earthquakes are regular events in some parts of the world and are among the deadliest naturally occurring crises. In addition, they can lead to secondary crises, such as tsunamis, toxic spills, and industrial disasters, as was the case with the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear disaster in Japan in 2011. Mass shooting and workplace violence, sadly, appear to be happening more often. The 2012 shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Conn., killed 20 children and 6 adult staff members. The Parkland, Fla., shootings claimed 17 lives. Transportation accidents, terrorist events, defective products, plant explosions, criminal activity, infectious diseases, and sudden economic downturns all can be considered crises (Sellnow & Seeger, 2013).

Communication in Times of Trouble: Best Practices for Crisis and Emergency Risk Communication, First Edition. Matthew W. Seeger and Timothy L. Sellnow.

Because our society is more complex, technologically sophisticated, dynamic, and interdependent than ever before, these crises can be very disruptive and destructive. Contamination of a basic food product, such as peanut paste, may have consequences for hundreds of consumer products, including cookies, crackers, cakes, cereals, candy, and other snack foods. The 2008 *Salmonella* contamination at Peanut Corporation of America led to the recall of almost 4,000 separate products that contained the company's peanut paste. A relatively small defect in a safety device may end up in thousands of cars, prompting industry-wide recalls. Takata Corporation's defective airbags were installed in dozens of automotive models. At least 12 companies and over 19 million cars were involved in the recall that likely cost the company at least $5 billion. An outbreak of an infectious disease in a remote part of the world can slow and limit air travel, cost billions in medical preparation, and create global fear. The 2014 Ebola outbreak in West Africa dominated media coverage for weeks and became a significant political issue in the United States because of fears the disease could jump to other parts of the world.

The ways we prepare for, respond to, and understand these and other crisis events are influenced by our communication. Risk communication, the process of informing people about potential hazards, is a central activity in helping people prepare for a crisis. The U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS) for example, has created a Ready.Gov website and a series of "Preparing Makes Sense" public service announcements to communicate risk information (U.S. Department of Homeland Security, 2015). Crisis communication is essential to emergency management. Alerts such as tornado warnings or fire alarms signal that we need to take immediate action in response to a risk. A tornado warning means there is an immediate risk of severe weather and people should take cover. A fire alarm signals a fire has been detected and people should leave the building. Communication helps us learn about risks and how to avoid them. Communication gives us information so we understand what to do in a crisis. After a crisis is over, communication is the process that helps us determine who to blame for what happened, what we can learn, and how to move beyond the destruction and loss.

What Is a Crisis?

Think for a moment about a traumatic event you experienced. Perhaps it involved severe weather, a fire, a transportation accident, or a flood. Maybe it's something a family member went through or an event you watched develop through the media. What were the event's primary features that made you think of this as a crisis? How did you feel? Were you

confused and afraid? What did you do? Did you seek out information and ask others for help? Were you instructed to take some specific action, such as seek shelter or evacuate? What harms occurred as a consequence of the crisis?

We perceive an event as a crisis based on several characteristics and not everyone will see the same event as a crisis. In some regions, a major snowstorm is a routine event and would not be seen as a crisis. In fact, the lack of snow in these regions might be seen as a disruptive and threatening development because people depend on winter tourism. Contamination of a municipal water supply and a boil water advisory might be seen as an annoyance for the first few hours or even the first day, but it will soon develop into a crisis.

Typically, a crisis is seen as a threatening event. Some high-priority goals, such as personal safety, health, or financial stability, are at risk. Sometimes the threat is to the safety of family, friends, pets, property, or community. In other cases, the threat is to reputation, career, or job or economic security. Almost always there is a feeling and a fear that something you value, something very important to you, might be harmed or lost. This threat to something that is highly valued is one of the defining characteristics of a crisis.

A crisis is also associated with uncertainty. Uncertainty is related to an inability to predict an outcome, anticipate what will happen next, or simply to deal with how little is known about what is happening and what might happen. Usually a crisis is not expected and is very surprising and shocking. For example, earthquakes typically occur with very little warning, even though there is good information about where earthquakes happen most frequently. Transportation accidents, fires, and terrorist events are also usually surprising. In other cases, crises are more predictable and less surprising. Hurricanes and tornadoes tend to occur in somewhat predictable locations at the same time of year and, although they may be surprising, are not unexpected. Some crises, such as infectious disease outbreaks or environmental contaminations, are slow moving and may last for months or even years. Predicting their onset is possible even if avoiding them is not. The annual influenza (flu) season regularly claims several thousand lives and typically does not escalate to the level of a serious epidemic. Even in cases where a crisis is predictable, there is still a great deal of uncertainty about what will happen as a consequence of the crisis.

One way a crisis creates uncertainty is by disrupting our sense of what is normal. The flu season is a normal, regular event and most of us know specific steps, such as getting a flu shot, washing hands, and covering coughs and sneezes, can limit the risk of getting sick. In some cases, flu can become a very serious threat to public health, such as the 1918

so-called Spanish flu, which killed between 50 and 100 million people worldwide (Taubenberger & Morens, 2006). When a crisis disrupts our sense of what is normal, we no longer have a clear sense of what to do, how to avoid risks, and what will happen next. In some recent cases of serious flu outbreaks, large public events were reduced or canceled to reduce the spread of the disease.

A final aspect of crisis many people experience is the need to take some action to reduce uncertainty or to contain and offset the harm. This may involve collecting information about what is happening, evacuating neighborhoods, boiling water, or helping victims. Generally, these actions must happen quickly to limit the harm. During tornadoes, for example, public warnings tell people to take cover immediately to save lives. When water supplies are contaminated with bacteria, the more quickly people stop drinking or treat the water through actions such as boiling, the lower the risk that large numbers of people will get sick. Any delay in issuing a boil water advisory can increase the level of harm.

Perceived threat, high levels of uncertainty, and short response time are three defining characteristics of most crises we experience. You probably observed all three conditions in the crisis you experienced and recognized the circumstances were not normal. Most, but not all, crises have all three elements; however, in general, a crisis is an event or series of events that are threatening, create high levels of uncertainty, and require some immediate response (Sellnow & Seeger, 2013). Crises are also disruptive to our sense of security and normalcy; generate high levels of confusion and uncertainty; result in anxiety, fear, and apprehension; and create a need to communicate. Communication is necessary to manage this crisis, reduce uncertainty, and limit the harm.

What Do We Mean by Crisis Communication?

Crisis communication is the process of planning, developing, and disseminating informational and persuasive messages for avoiding, containing, and managing harm from risky, threatening, and uncertain conditions. Crisis communication has many of the same features of other forms of communication, including senders, receivers, messages, and channels. Senders include the government agencies that oversee emergency responses or the organizations and agencies that have caused a crisis. During a crisis, senders are also those who are affected by the crisis or the media organizations reporting on the crisis. In most major crises, there are many senders and this sometimes creates confusing and conflicting messages.

We view receivers from an inclusive perspective. Rather than using terms such as the public or general public, we refer to receivers as publics. We choose this plural term because of the tremendous diversity of relevant audiences and their varying needs, values, backgrounds, and perspectives. Publics are communities and stakeholders with direct or indirect connections to an organization, an issue, or an event (Leitch & Motion, 2010). In a crisis, publics may include employees, customers, suppliers, neighbors, government, response agencies, media, and family members, as well as those individuals or groups directly affected by the event. Each of these groups may include members from diverse cultures, backgrounds, ethnicities, ages, income levels, and education. Considerable research in crisis and emergency communication shows that a failure to account for the cultural, ethnic, and social diversity of receivers as separate publics, for example, leads to failures in communication (Littlefield, 2013). Sensitivity to diversity is essential in the application of each of the best practices we describe in this book. In fact, some agencies, such as the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) disseminate messages in many languages to ensure diverse communities have access to critical information during a crisis.

As with other forms of communication, crisis messages are disseminated through channels. Channels are what carry the message. During a crisis, one of the most important factors is how quickly a specific channel can get the message out to as many people as possible. Some new media channels, such as Twitter and Facebook, can be very fast, so much so that crisis agencies sometimes monitor social media to determine when a crisis happens. Traditional broadcast media, such as television and radio, also cover events in real time and can be very effective forms of crisis communication. Radio, because it is very resilient and widely available, is often used as a standard channel for crisis messages. Warning signals, such as fire alarms or tornado sirens, have been used for many years as ways to immediately get the attention of people and alert them of a risk. A second important feature of a crisis communication channel is how widely it distributes the message. Crisis messages must reach as many of the people who are at risk as possible. There are many cases of people who did not receive an evacuation warning because of how the message was distributed. Sometimes, crises occur at night when people are sleeping and they do not receive the message. Although Twitter and Facebook are very fast, some publics do not monitor these channels and would not receive a message distributed through these channels. Many people no longer watch television news and even fewer read traditional newspapers. In fact, only about 20% of people read a daily newspaper. Regardless of the channel used to initially disseminate a crisis message, most people will use direct face-to-face or person-to-person communication to

confirm the risk or warn others. This may involve phone calls, text messages, or a quick check-in with neighbors and friends to see what they are doing during a crisis. In fact, many of us will first learn about a major crisis from another person, a friend or family member, before we turn to established mass media channels of communication for more information.

The development of social media channels has changed many of the ways we communicate during a crisis. Handheld mobile devices, such as cell phones and tablets, have allowed those experiencing a crisis to both send and receive information in real time. Pictures of floods or fires are often posted on Facebook pages and texted to friends and family members before journalists arrive on the scene. Response agencies can use social media to quickly update publics on developments, recommend actions, or address rumors through Twitter feeds or social media sites. Google maps have proved very useful in facilitating evacuations in cases of wildfires and floods. Text alerts are very important in alerting people to shelter in place during active shooter threats. Social media is very flexible and interactive, allowing for people experiencing a crisis and those managing it to exchange information in real time. In fact, social media can be used in implementing all of the best practices described in this book and should be included in any effort to manage a risk or crisis.

A final important feature of crisis communication channels concerns resilience. Some forms of communication are easily disrupted and take a very long time to repair. Traditional broadcast television, for example, can be very vulnerable to severe weather events. Cellular telephone networks can be disrupted by earthquakes, fires, or even attacks. Traditional newspapers often have both their production and delivery disrupted by a crisis. Radio, as we described earlier, is a very resilient form of communication and, in many cases, local radio stations disrupted by crises are quickly back on the air providing important information to the public. Most people have radios in their cars and many emergency management agencies recommend buying portable radios with built-in, hand-cranked generators. Radio can also be flexible and address the elements of a crisis as they emerge.

Communication can also help promote broader community resilience during a crisis. Community resilience is the ability of a community to utilize resources to avoid, respond to, withstand, and recover from adverse situations, such as crises. Resilience has many components, including the amount of connectedness, the availability of resources, the level of planning and preparation, and the level of vulnerability a community faces. Communication can promote connections between the elements that make up a community and help deploy and utilize resources effectively. Planning and preparedness as well as understanding risk

requires communication. The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) developed a framework for crisis management called the Whole Community approach. This approach emphasizes government is just one component and the community itself must be empowered to prepare and respond if a crisis is to be managed successfully. This includes local community groups, companies, and schools. Through dialog, community assets can be organized and strengthened and responses can be more effective and efficient (FEMA, 2016).

What Distinguishes Crisis Communication?

A crisis is an extreme event that is abnormal, threatening, creates uncertainty, and requires a response. Crisis communication is the process of sending and receiving messages between senders and receivers about the risk of a crisis under the extreme conditions of a crisis. Communication is important to all stages of a crisis—before an event occurs, during the crisis, and after the crisis has ended. Before a crisis, communication helps publics understand risks, prepare and plan for risks, and avoid them when possible. During a crisis, communication is critical to coordinating response efforts, limiting harm, and deploying resources. After a crisis has subsided, communication helps us sort out blame and responsibility as well as learn and pass on the lessons from the crisis.

Communication professionals, public relations practitioners, public information officers, community liaisons, health communicators, journalists, social and digital media practitioners, technical writers, and webmasters are increasingly participating in risk communication. Effective communication is one of the most important resources necessary to manage risks and crisis. There are many cases where effective communication helped reduce a risk so a crisis never occurred and where communication helped limit the harm of a crisis. In fact, the vast majority of risks never become full crises. There are also many cases where failed communication made a crisis much worse and increased the harm to people, organizations, and communities.

What Are Best Practices?

In describing effective crisis communication, we present best practices as ways to improve practice (Seeger, 2006). A best practices approach is a way to describe techniques, methods, or guidelines that have been effective in most cases. A best practice is an industry standard or a widely accepted approach shown to lead to positive outcomes. These methods

have typically been widely accepted and represent a recommended course of action. As new research and techniques develop, best practices can change and evolve. Developing and using best practices has been widely applied in business, medicine, education, engineering, government, and many other professional contexts. The goal of best practice research is to use the experiences of the past to develop practical knowledge and apply the lessons to improve operations (Steelman & McCaffrey, 2013; Veil & Husted, 2012).

A crisis is a complex and dynamic event, and each crisis is in some ways unique. Although best practices will not be successful in all cases, as general guidelines, they help us prepare and respond appropriately. A crisis creates a great deal of uncertainty, confusion, and chaos and most people have very limited experience responding to these events. Sometimes, crisis results in a kind of analysis paralysis where managers and communication professionals simply do not know what to do or say and, as a consequence, seem unable to respond. Under these conditions of high uncertainty and confusion about what to do, having basic guidelines about how to respond can be very helpful.

A best practices approach can help provide general guidance for crisis communication during the extreme conditions of a crisis. Because a crisis is an abnormal event creating high uncertainty, best practices can be especially helpful in guiding planning and response. The following sections in this book present 10 best practices for crisis communication. These are:

1) Take a process approach: A process approach to crisis communication emphasizes the connections between activities and outcomes and provides an outline of how a crisis evolves over time.
2) Engage in preevent planning: Planning crisis communication before an event occurs is very important in creating an effective response. Crisis communication plans are most effective when they are integrated with other plans and are connected to core values.
3) Form stakeholder partnerships with publics: Creating authentic dialogs and partnerships with diverse publics enhances cooperation. Strong partnerships with publics can create a reservoir of goodwill that can be critical during a crisis.
4) Listen to and acknowledge concerns of publics: Audience analysis is one of the key methods for improving communication. Listening to and acknowledging the concerns of publics allows messages to be adapted as a crisis evolves.
5) Communicate with honesty, frankness, and openness: Although it is often difficult to be honest, frank, and open during a crisis, these approaches are necessary to improve trust. Responding to a crisis with a public relations spin, withholding information, or refusing to comment is a very risky approach.

6) Collaborate and coordinate with credible sources: Many groups will be involved in a crisis response and collaboration and coordination with credible sources allows for more effective use of resources.
7) Meet the needs of the media: Media will report on most major crises and effective crisis communication must make use of both old and new media to disseminate messages. Providing access to the media can reduce confusion and rumors.
8) Communicate with compassion: Sometimes organizations are reluctant to express concern for fear of admitting responsibility. However, compassion in the form of concern and empathy is an important response whenever people have been harmed from a crisis.
9) Accept uncertainty and ambiguity: Uncertainty and ambiguity are always part of a crisis and being able to communicate under these conditions is critical to success. Not having all the answers does not mean there is no need to communicate.
10) Communicate messages of empowerment: Crisis can strip away our sense of personal control and messages that empower publics can help reduce stress and trauma. People have a basic need to do something in response to a crisis and it is important to provide some direction.

Summary

Crises are threatening and uncertain events that occur frequently. They have the potential to create very severe impacts and can profoundly damage communities, businesses, organizations, families, and individuals. One way to manage the risk and uncertainty of a crisis is through effective communication. In fact, communication is one of the most important tools for effective crisis management. It simply isn't possible to manage a crisis without communication. One method for improving crisis communication is using best practices. In the following chapters we describe how 10 best practices of crisis communication can improve effectiveness.

Key Takeaways for Communicating During Crisis

Crises occur often and are part of social, community, and organization life. Our complex, dynamic, and interdependent world creates many conditions that result in crises. In some cases, these are significant events that create widespread harm.

1) Crises are threatening, surprising, and create high levels of uncertainty. They are outside what we consider normal and they require some rapid action to reduce and contain the harm.
2) One of the most important aspects of managing a crisis is communication. Crisis communication is the process of sending and receiving messages between senders and receivers about the risk of a crisis under the extreme conditions of a crisis.
3) A best practices approach to crisis communication follows established guidelines, standards, and generally agreed upon techniques. These have been developed from research and practice and, although they don't include all the answers, they can serve as general recommendations.

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