

# Parameters for Crisis Communication

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Organizations frequently find themselves in situations we would define as a crisis. Consider but a few examples: Union Carbide's devastating chemical release in Bhopal; Carrefour suffering from protests at its stores in China because of French attacks on the Olympic torch relay; customers experiencing *E. coli* at Taco Bell; rumors about designer Tommy Hilfiger's racist comments; Tyco executives stealing millions from the company; and Oxfam claiming Starbucks did not support coffee growers by opposing the branding of certain African coffees. We must accept that no organization is immune from a crisis anywhere in the world even if that organization is vigilant and actively seeks to prevent crises.

The reality of crises leads to the need for preparation and readiness to respond – crisis management. The critical component in crisis management is communication. Over the past decade, there has been a massive increase in crisis communication research. As the field of crisis communication develops, it is important to develop parameters for that growth. This chapter and the *Handbook of Crisis Communication* are steps towards articulating the parameters and utility of crisis communication. The focus in this book is the research used to advance our understanding of communication's role in the crisis management process. To properly set the stage for this collection, it is important to define key terms in crisis management and overview key research on the central theme of crisis communication. By examining these fundamental elements, the parameters of crisis communication begin to emerge.

## Key Definitions for Crisis

Because of the diversity of crisis research, it is important to present definitions of key crisis terms early to help set boundaries. The key terms for the *Handbook* include crisis, crisis management, and crisis communication. The three are inextricably interconnected and must be considered in a progression from crisis to

crisis management to crisis communication. By ending with crisis communication, we begin to get a feel for the scope of this burgeoning field of inquiry.

### Crisis defined

As you read this book, it will become clear there is no one, universally accepted definition of crisis. You will also note many conceptual similarities in the definitions even when the definitions are not exactly the same. Box 1.1 lists commonly used crisis definitions. The list contains definitions from well-known crisis authors as well as covering a range of disciplines, including public relations, management, and organizational communication.

One point is worth discussing before offering the crisis definition utilized in this chapter. Three definitions note that crises can have positive or negative outcomes. People frequently claim that the Chinese symbol for crisis represents both

#### Box 1.1 Definitions of Crisis

a major occurrence with a potentially negative outcome affecting an organization, company, or industry, as well as publics, products, services or good name. It interrupts normal business transactions and can sometimes threaten the existence of the organization (Fearn-Banks 1996: 1)

is not necessarily a bad thing. It may be a radical change for good as well as bad” (Friedman 2002: 5)

an event that affects or has the potential to affect the whole of an organization. Thus, if something affects only a small, isolated part of an organization, it may not be a major crisis. In order for a major crisis to occur, it must exact a major toll on human lives, property, financial earnings, the reputation, and the general health and well-being of an organization” (Mitroff & Anagnos 2001: 34–35)

turning points in organizational life” (Regester 1989: 38)

an incident that is unexpected, negative, and overwhelming” (Barton 2001: 2)

a specific, unexpected and non-routine organizationally based event or series of events which creates high levels of uncertainty and threat or perceived threat to an organization’s high priority goals” (Seeger, Sellnow, & Ulmer 1998: 233)

turning point for better or worse” (Fink 1986: 15)

an event that is an unpredictable, major threat that can have a negative effect on the organization, industry, or stakeholders if handled improperly” (Coombs 1999: 2)

an opportunity and a threat. Some argue that is a very idiosyncratic translation and is overstated. Regardless, opportunity and threat are more a function of the outcomes of crisis management rather than a defining characteristic of crisis. As chapters 35 and 38 highlight, we can look to crises as opportunities for growth. However, I doubt any manager would argue for the strategic creation of a crisis to advance organizational goals as an effective form of management. Still, there may be extreme cases where only a crisis can save the organization. On the whole, crisis management seeks to prevent crises. Prevention protects people, property, financial resources, and reputation assets. Inherently, crises are threats, but how the crisis is managed determines if the outcomes are threats or opportunities. Effective crisis management can result in stronger organizations but “management by crisis” would take a heavy toll on stakeholders.

This chapter defines crisis as “the perception of an unpredictable event that threatens important expectancies of stakeholders and can seriously impact an organization’s performance and generate negative outcomes” (Coombs 2007b: 2–3). I would like to unpack the critical elements of this definition that serve to characterize a crisis. This crisis definition was informed by discussions at the 2005 NCA Pre-Conference on Integrating Research and Outreach in Crisis and Risk Communication. A variety of experts in the two fields were assembled and one point on the agenda was how to define crisis and risk. A significant point in that discussion was the perceptual nature of crises. How stakeholders view an event has ramifications for whether or not that event becomes a crisis. The definition attempts to honor stakeholder concerns and the role they can play in co-creating the meaning of a crisis. Meaning is socially constructed and crises are no exception. Thus, it was important to utilize a definition that reflects the perceptual nature of crises. Chapter 37 does an excellent job of further arguing for the importance of stakeholders in crisis management.

It is also important to separate crises from incidents (Coombs 2004b). Practitioners often take issue with how loosely the term crisis is bandied about. Crisis should be reserved for serious events that require careful attention from management. This belief stems from the fact that the label “crisis” in an organization results in the allocation of time, attention, and resources (Billings, Milburn, & Schaalman 1980). The majority of the crisis definitions reflect the need to reserve the term crisis for serious events. So the event has to have the potential to seriously impact the organization. But the definition should not be viewed as limiting potential harm only to the organization. Harming stakeholders has to rate as the most significant “negative outcome.” The definition uses “negative outcomes” to include any type of harm to stakeholders, including physical, financial, and psychological. Potential is used because actions taken by crisis managers may prevent a crisis or significantly reduce the damage one can inflict. Crisis management is more than reaction; it can be prevention and preparation too.

Finally, the definition reinforces the role of stakeholders in the crisis through the idea of anomalies. Crises are unusual occurrences that cannot be predicted but are expected. True, managers should anticipate crises can occur and on any

given day numerous organizations have crises. The analogy between crisis and earthquakes is fitting. People in Southern California know an earthquake can and will occur but they do not know when exactly one will happen. However, all crises are anomalies because they violate what stakeholders expect. Consider the following stakeholder expectations: trains should not derail, milk should not sicken children, and tacos from restaurants should not contain *e. coli*. It is this anomalous dimension of crises that draws the attention of the media and other stakeholders. Crises are unusual negative events, so humans are drawn to them just like people on the highway gawk at accidents.

### Crisis management defined

Crisis management can be defined as “a set of factors designed to combat crises and to lessen the actual damages inflicted” (Coombs 2007b: 5) . Moreover, crisis management “seeks to prevent or lessen the negative outcomes of a crisis and thereby protect the organization, stakeholders, and/or industry from damage” (Coombs 1999: 4). We should think of crisis management as a process with many parts, such as preventative measures, crisis management plans, and post-crisis evaluations. The set of factors that constitute crisis management can be divided into three categories: pre-crisis, crisis, and post-crisis. Pre-crisis involves efforts to prevent crises and to prepare for crisis management. Crisis is the response to an actual event. Post-crisis are efforts to learn from the crisis event (Coombs 2007b). These three categories reflect the phases of crisis management and are useful because they provide a mechanism for considering the breadth of crisis communication.

### Crisis communication defined

Crisis communication can be defined broadly as the collection, processing, and dissemination of information required to address a crisis situation. In pre-crisis, crisis communication revolves around collecting information about crisis risks, making decisions about how to manage potential crises, and training people who will be involved in the crisis management process. The training includes crisis team members, crisis spokespersons, and any individuals who will help with the response. Crisis communication includes the collection and processing of information for crisis team decision making along with the creation and dissemination of crisis messages to people outside of the team (the traditional definition of crisis communication). Post-crisis involves dissecting the crisis management effort, communicating necessary changes to individuals, and providing follow-up crisis messages as needed.

Crisis communication has focused on the crisis category/crisis response – what organizations say and do after a crisis. Crisis responses are highly visible to stakeholders and very important to the effectiveness of the crisis management effort. For instance, improper crisis responses make the situation worse. It is by considering the breadth of crisis management that we will stretch the boundaries of what

is studied in crisis communication. All of the chapters in Part VIII, Future Research Directions, argue for expanding the focus of crisis communication and can be placed within the parameters of crisis management presented here. Furthermore, a broader definition of crisis communication allows us to better draw on the allied fields for insights on how to improve crisis communication (the focus of chapter 2).

## Crisis Management Process

Crisis communication is a field that has witnessed amazing growth in both the professional and academic community over the past decade. The increased number of articles and books on the subject is testament to that development. The growth is positive because of the pressure for effective crisis communication. Crises can create threats to public safety, environmental wellness, and organizational survival. Crisis communication is a critical element in effective crisis management. The main purpose of this chapter is to provide a context for this *Handbook* by reviewing the history of crisis communication. However, any discussion of crisis communication must begin by reviewing the roots of crisis management, the larger context for crisis communication.

This section traces the origins of crisis management. From there the focus shifts to an overview of the various “types” of crisis communication.

### Crisis management: Roots of a field

In 1986 Steven Fink published the seminal work in crisis management: *Crisis Management: Planning for the Inevitable*. Fink’s (1986) book began to detail the emerging field of crisis management. Today, there exists a vast array of crisis management books, but Fink’s remains a useful classic. Crisis management did not appear from thin air. The roots of crisis management reside in emergency and disaster management.

Emergency and disaster management studied ways to prevent incidents and how to respond to/cope with incidents. We will return to the connection between disasters and crises in the next chapter. Works in crisis management first appeared in the *International Journal of Emergencies and Disasters*. Moreover, we see strong emphasis on disaster in the publication record of the *Journal of Contingencies and Crisis Management*. We see the split with disaster with the phrasing “industrial crisis management” and the emergence of *Industrial Crisis Quarterly*, which later became *Organization & Environment*. Disaster research developed on a parallel trajectory following Quarantelli (1988) and others, while crisis management could look to Fink (1986) and those more interested in organizational crises. Tracing all the works that informed crisis communication would be a monumental task. We must keep this history of crisis management brief or risk creating a tangent.

To fully explore crisis communication, we need to begin by reviewing the crisis management process. To develop, a field has to have models of its process as they help us to understand what is being done and key concepts. Examining the crisis management process allows us to understand better the critical points where crisis communication enters the equation. Earlier in this chapter the terms crisis and crisis management were defined. The definition of crisis reflects a process view. The process notion of crisis management is reflected in the field's models. Fink (1986) was among the first to examine crises as occurring in stages. Fink's model has four stages: (1) *prodromal*, warning signs of a crisis appear; (2) *acute*, a crisis occurs; (3) *chronic*, recovery period that can include lingering concerns from the crisis; and (4) *crisis resolution*, the organization is back to operations as normal. Fink is proposing a model of how crises develop.

Smith (1990) developed a three step model of the crisis management process: (1) *crisis management*, a crisis incubates; (2) *operational crisis*, a trigger event occurs and first responders arrive; and (3) *crisis of legitimization*, a communicative response is provided, media and government become interested, and organizational learning occurs. There is a feedback loop from the crisis of legitimization to crisis management. Smith begins to move beyond the crisis process itself by considering crisis management efforts as well.

Mitroff (1994) offers a five stage model: (1) *signal detection*, seek to identify warning signs and take preventative measures; (2) *probing and prevention*, active search and reduction of risk factors; (3) *damage containment*, crisis occurs and actions taken to limit its spread; (4) *recovery*, effort to return to normal operations; and (5) *learning*, people review the crisis management effort and learn from it. Mitroff is modeling the crisis management process more than just the crisis process itself. In general the crisis models reflect the emergency management process of (1) mitigation, (2) preparedness, (3) response, and (4) recovery (Principles 2003). The primary difference is that Mitroff highlights learning as a separate stage.

The crisis management process can be organized around the simple, three phase model introduced earlier: pre-crisis, crisis, and post-crisis. Pre-crisis includes signal detection, prevention, and preparation. Crisis covers recognition of the trigger event and response. Post-crisis considers actions after operations have returned to normal and include providing follow-up information to stakeholders, cooperating with investigations, and learning from the crisis event (Coombs 2007b). The three phase model is used in this chapter to organize the discussion of crisis communication.

## General Nature of Crisis Communication Research

Crisis communication is a very applied concept. Managers will take the advice offered in various writings to help them cope with crises. Crisis communication is a nexus of praxis where theory and application must intersect. Grandiose ideas or unattainable ideals are of little use. Theories and principles should help to improve

crisis management rather than being academic exercises. This applied focus originates in the belief that improved crisis management helps to protect stakeholders and organizations. At its heart, crisis management is about making the world a safer place. Therefore, developing theories that can be applied to helping others has value and purpose. Too often, people only see how crisis management benefits organizations. However, to be effective and benefit organizations, crisis management must seek to protect and to aid stakeholders placed at risk by crises or potential crises.

The applied nature of crisis communication is reflected in the development of its body of knowledge. The initial crisis communication research was written by practitioners and appeared in non-academic journals (Bergman 1994; Carney & Jordan 1993; Loewendick 1993). Applied research seeks to use theory to solve real-world problems. As academics embraced the need to solve crisis communication problems, publications began to appear in academic journals. While of interest to management researchers, the bulk of the crisis communication research emerged from public relations and communication studies. Management research focused more on crisis management itself and viewed crisis communication as a variable in the process (e.g., Marcus & Goodman 1991). Researchers in public relations and communication studies made crisis communication the focal point of their crisis management research (e.g., Hearit 1994).

The initial practitioner research in crisis communication developed advice through war stories and cases. War stories are a specific type of case where practitioners would recount their crisis management efforts. These are simply descriptive accounts of what was done *sans* any analytic framework. Case studies of other organizations' crises were analyzed to illustrate points that seemed effective. These cases provided the foundation for the development of advice for future crisis managers, frequently in the form of lists of "dos" and "don'ts." As people began to agree on the advice, a body of accepted wisdom began to form. Crisis managers could glean recommendations from this primordial body of knowledge.

The next evolution in the crisis communication research was case studies analyzed by academics. Academics introduced specific theoretical frameworks or principles for analyzing cases. The earliest example is the application of apologetics to crisis communication (e.g., Dionisopolous & Vibbert 1988; Ice 1991). The academic case studies were more rigorous because they systematically applied specific analytic frameworks/tools. The image repair research by Benoit (1995) and his adherents is a perfect example. A large number of published case studies have utilized Benoit's image repair framework (e.g., Benoit & Brinson 1999; Benoit & Czerwinski 1997). The academic case studies were still speculative. The qualitative nature of the crisis communication cases meant the researchers brought their own interpretations to the data and generalizations should not be drawn from the results (Stacks 2002).

As chapter 3 reveals, the case study method has dominated academic crisis communication research. I would argue that the practitioner and academic cases both offer speculative advice. Such speculative advice opens the door for



additional theory building and eventually to theory testing. Theory could be developed as the cases identified potentially useful variables and potential relationships. The authors of the cases often made predictive claims that could and should be subject to testing. The crisis case studies provided and continue to provide the fodder for more advanced thinking in crisis communication. Researchers need to test the advice and observations from the case studies to see if the advice is verifiable or not. A number of academics began calling for more theory and theory testing in crisis communication (e.g., Dawar & Pillutla 2000; Seeger, Sellnow, & Ulmer 1998) and researchers are beginning to meet that challenge.

However, cases are not the only source of inspiration for crisis research. Theory development targeting crisis communication is emerging. Situational crisis communication theory (SCCT) was developed for this specific research area. SCCT translated attribution theory into the language of crisis communication as a base for the theory. A series of studies have refined and tested propositions proposed by SCCT (e.g., Coombs 2007a; Coombs & Holladay 1996, 2001). Contingency theory was developed as a grand theory of public relations. The idea is that it could be applied to any aspect of public relations. Researchers have begun to develop contingency theory's utility to explaining crisis communication and testing propositions related to crisis communication (e.g., Cameron, Pang, & Jin 2008; Pang, Jin, & Cameron 2004). Both theories are discussed in more detail later in this chapter.

We are currently experiencing an impressive growth in the number of experimental and empirical analyses of crisis communication. (Part II, Methodological Variety, will delve into the various methods of crisis communication research in greater detail.) This trend is ushering in a renaissance in crisis communication research. In a sense we may have reached a plateau with current case studies. New theories and experiments may be necessary to advance crisis communication research to the level of evidence-based management. Evidence-based management is inspired by evidence-based medicine. Do you want to be treated used a proven therapy or something someone thinks might work? The "data" count as evidence only when they have been scientifically tested and verified (Rousseau 2005). Crisis communication would do well to move toward an evidence-based focus because our advice has ramifications for how people practice crisis communication. We should offer advice that is tested and proven rather than speculative. One goal of this *Handbook* is to inspire additional research in crisis communication while serving as a resource for that research.

The number and diversity of the crisis communication research studies is both a blessing and a curse. The blessing is the variety of insights offered to the field. The curse is the wide dispersion of the insights that makes it difficult to accumulate and to integrate the various lessons into a useable form. Think of the number of books and articles available on this topic. The research is scattered not only through numerous journals but also across a variety of disciplines (Pearson & Clair 1998). It is a challenge for crisis managers to keep abreast of the latest and most useful ideas in crisis communication. Another goal of this *Handbook* is to serve



as a resource that represents some of the best crisis communication research from a wide array of perspectives.

It is probably natural that crisis communication research began in the practice and then was explored by academics. Public relations research itself followed the pattern of practice, followed by research and theory. We can see practice ahead of research and theory in the current online applications of crisis communication. A practice emerges then researchers try to understand the practice and develop ways to improve it. Ideally, theory constructing leads to theory testing. The results of this research can then be used to guide the practice. The theoretically derived knowledge should add value to the practice.

## **Crisis Communication: Overview and History**

Communication is the essence of crisis management. A crisis or the threat of crisis creates a need for information. Through communication, the information is collected, processed into knowledge, and shared with others. Communication is critical throughout the entire crisis management process. Each phase of the crisis management process has its own demand for creating and sharing knowledge – the need to collect and interpret information. Using the three phases of crisis management we identify various “types” of crisis communication and provide a brief historical record of the key extant research on the topic.

In addition to the three phases, it is helpful to differentiate between two basic types of crisis communication: (1) crisis knowledge management and (2) stakeholder reaction management (Coombs 2009). Crisis knowledge management involves identifying sources, collecting information, analyzing information (knowledge creation), sharing knowledge, and decision making. Crisis knowledge management is behind the scenes. It involves the work the crisis team does to create public responses to a crisis. Stakeholder reaction management comprises communicative efforts (words and actions) to influence how stakeholders perceive the crisis, the organization in crisis, and the organization’s crisis response. All of the various crisis communication subjects covered in this section can easily fit into either of these two categories.

### Pre-crisis phase

In the pre-crisis phase, crisis communication concentrates on locating and reducing risk. The anticipatory model of crisis management is among the limited research in this area (Olaniran & Williams 2008). Prevention is the top priority for the anticipatory model. The model employs vigilance during the pre-crisis phases to aid crisis decision making and prevention. Wan and Pfau (2004) recommend using pre-crisis messages to inoculate stakeholders about crises. Using the biological analogy, the pre-crisis messages give stakeholders some information about a potential crisis to help build up resistance to a negative reaction and negative media

coverage of the crisis. The results of their study largely replicate the results of prior reputation research. In other words, reputation building prior to a crisis is beneficial to an organization in crisis (Coombs & Holladay 2002, 2006; Dawar & Pillutla 2000). We shall return to the topic of prior reputation in the discussion of crisis response.

We see some notions of prevention in González-Herrero & Pratt's (1996) work to integrate issues management into crisis management with the "proactive symmetrical crisis management process" (p. 89). The idea was that crisis management would become more proactive when fused with issues management. The proactive, symmetrical process has four steps. Step 1 is issues management with an emphasis on environmental scanning. Crisis managers try to find early signs of a crisis (an issue) and take actions designed to influence the development of the issue. Early identification permits time for analysis and strategizing. Step 2 is planning prevention. The crisis managers take actions designed to prevent a crisis from emerging. Scanning segues into monitoring of an issue. Crisis managers also assess the threat posed by the issue by examining it in terms of the damage it could cause to the organization, the degree of control over the situation, and options for an organizational response.

Step 3 is crisis and is the usual crisis management focus on having a plan, team, and spokesperson that are applied to the crisis. Step 4 is post-crisis where the issue is still tracked in the media, as well as drawing interest from other stakeholders. Crisis managers continue to communicate with stakeholders and evaluate the crisis management effort. This perspective remains in the conceptual stage with little research on the topic. However, there is great potential for additional research in this approach to pre-crisis communication.

Of particular need is more research on crisis sensing or the location of warning signs. Research from communication networks and knowledge management should be applied to understand how organizations develop systems for locating and tracking potential crisis risks. Part of crisis sensing would be efforts to monitor the media and that includes the Internet. In crisis sensing, the practice outpaces the theory (Coombs 2007b). Companies offer computer systems for tracking data relevant to crisis managers, especially Internet-based data. However, we lack much theory and research to inform the use of these systems. The crisis sensing development reflects the evolution of crisis communication in general. First, practitioners report on their practices and then academics study and critique the actions to determine the most effective way of executing the tasks. Again, a pattern of theory trying to make sense of the practice emerges.

Preparation has received a fair amount of communicative attention through training. Concern for crisis communication is reflected in spokesperson training and team decision making skills. Media relations was a key element of early printed research on crisis communication (e.g., Barton 2001). Practitioner and academic research has done an excellent job of identifying what spokespersons should and should not do during a crisis. We have the perfect blend of practice and theory informing one another. The starting point was the published conventional

wisdom of practitioners. Later, research found data that support this wisdom. For instance, spokespersons are told to avoid saying “no comment.” Research established that when people hear “no comment” they think the organization is guilty and hiding something (Guth 1995). Research in other areas of communication validated many of the accepted practices. The deception research supports the advice that a spokesperson must have solid eye contact, few vocal fillers, and few nervous adaptors because people use those three cues to assess deception (Feeley & de Turck 1995). Thus the spokesperson advice on delivery is a sound recommendation to avoid looking deceptive.

Part of preparation includes exercises designed to improve the crisis management skills of the crisis teams. Crisis teams are decision making units. They must make a series of decisions about how the organization should respond to the crisis. Decision making is a function of what is sometimes called situational awareness. Situational awareness occurs when the crisis team feels it has enough information to make a decision. Communication provides the knowledge the crisis team requires to create situational awareness and to make decisions. Exercises should include training and practice in the communicative skills that facilitate situational awareness (Kolfschoten & Appelman 2006).

Finally, risk communication is under-utilized in the pre-crisis phase. The extended parallel process model (EPPM) can be used to explain the positive effect of exercises and related risk information on community members. Kim Witte’s (Witte, Meyer, & Martell 2001) EPPM provides a way to understand how people will respond to risk messages. Fear can motivate people to action if a threat is perceived to be relevant to people and significant. For people living near a facility with hazardous materials, the threat can be perceived as relevant and significant. When people believe a threat is real, they then make efficacy assessments. If people are to follow the advice given in a risk message, they must believe that the proposed action will work (response efficacy) and that they can enact the proposed action (self-efficacy). If people do not believe the response will work and/or do not think they can execute the response, they ignore the risk and messages associated with it. Exercises help community members understand that the organization’s emergency plan can work. Community members learn how the plan affects them, how they can be a part of the plan, and the general efficacy of the crisis plan.

In emergencies, people have two basic options: stay or leave. Staying is known as shelter-in-place. People stay inside and close any openings that would allow outside air into the building such as doors, windows, and air conditioning. Leaving is known as evacuation. People leave using designated routes and are encouraged to take “go bags” with them. Go bags contain essential items such as medicine, water, and some food. By participating in exercises community members can learn that they can enact the actions required in the emergency plan – they can take the steps necessary to evacuate or to shelter-in-place.

Crisis communication has done little to integrate the relevance of risk communication to crisis preparation. One notable exception is a study by Heath and

Palenchar (2000). They found that knowledge of emergency warning systems increased concern over risks while still increasing acceptance for the organization. It seems that knowing about the emergency warning kept community members vigilant rather than lulling them into a false sense of security. Vigilance is preferable to complacency in a crisis and proper crisis communication during preparation can set the foundation for a more effective crisis response. Heath, Lee, and Ni (2009) extend this finding by demonstrating the value of pre-crisis communication and perceptions of efficacy. When pre-crisis messages are from people similar to the audience in race/ethnicity, gender, and age, or are sensitive to their concerns, the people are more likely to comply with the message. Moreover, message sensitivity is positively correlated with self-efficacy and some forms of response efficacy. Another exception is an article by Williams and Olaniran (1998) that recommends crisis managers factor perceptions of risk into their explanation of risks to stakeholders.

### Crisis response phase

The crisis response phase is the most heavily researched aspect of crisis communication. The reason is that how and what an organization communicates during a crisis has a significant effect on the outcomes of the crisis, including the number of injuries and the amount of reputational damage sustained by the organization. We shall provide a cursory review by highlighting key research trends in the crisis communication as crisis response.

*Tactical advice* The early research was tactical in nature, a type of “how to” instruction. This would include the proper form for spokespersons to use when meeting the media. Four accepted pieces of wisdom emerged from the tactical research and later were supported by theory and research in crisis communication and related areas of communication. We have already noted avoiding “no comment.” The other three are be quick, be accurate, and be consistent. Practitioners emphasized a quick response, usually within the first hour (Barton 2001). The Internet has only increased the need for speed. A failure to respond lets others provide the information that will frame how the crisis will be perceived by stakeholders. Silence is too passive and allows others to control the crisis (Brummett 1980). Moreover, research has proven the value of bad news coming from the organization itself. When an organization is the information source about a crisis occurring, there is less reputational damage than if the news media are the first to deliver the information. This effect has been called “stealing thunder” (Arpan & Pompper 2003; Arpan & Roskos-Ewoldsen 2005) and provides proof that organizations must discuss the crisis and not remain silent.

Accuracy builds credibility while inaccuracy erodes it. Furthermore, misinformation can place stakeholders at risk. For instance, releasing the wrong batch number for a frozen food recall results in people still consuming the dangerous food. Inaccuracy can penalize both the organization in crisis and its stakeholders.

Being consistent is another way to build credibility. Inconsistencies create confusion and make crisis managers appear to be incompetent. Consistency is often called speaking with one voice. However, people often confuse speaking with one voice with having just one spokesperson during the crisis (Coombs 2007b). Most organizations use multiple spokespersons during a crisis. Different spokespeople may be needed to cover various areas of expertise, or a crisis may extend over days making it impossible for one person to be the sole voice for the organization. Spokespersons must be kept informed of the same information to help insure consistency (Carney & Jorden 1993).

*Strategic advice* The bulk of the academic research in crisis communication focuses on the strategic use of crisis responses. Strategic crisis communication research seeks to understand how crisis communication can be used to achieve specific outcomes and have the desired effect on stakeholders. The emphasis is on how various crisis response strategies are used to pursue various organizational objectives. Sturges (1994) provides a useful framework for categorizing crisis responses by strategic focus. Sturges' three strategic foci are (1) *instructing information*, how to cope physically with the crisis; (2) *adjusting information*, how to cope psychologically with the crisis; and (3) *reputation repair*, attempts to ameliorate the damage a crisis inflicts on an organization. Clearly, the three are related, as instructing and adjusting information will influence reputation repair. It is surprising how researchers frequently overlook instructing and adjusting information.

Instructing information, according to Sturges (1994), is the first priority in a crisis. Yes, public safety should be the preeminent concern in a crisis. Oddly, instructing information is taken for granted in most crisis communication research. Although there is some research examining how people respond to emergency information (e.g., Heath & Palenchar 2005) and the need for instructing information (Gibson 1997), we have only begun to scratch the surface. If an organization fails to provide instructing information, the stakeholders and organizations will suffer even more. Safety is a binding force in a crisis. Organizations must protect stakeholders to protect themselves. A lack of regard for stakeholder safety will intensify the damage a crisis inflicts on an organization. In essence, a failure to protect the safety of stakeholders will breed a second crisis. Not only has the organization had a problem, but it did not seem to care about its stakeholders.

Adjusting information includes the need to express sympathy and to explain what the organization is doing to prevent a repeat of the crisis. Efforts to prevent a repeat of the crisis are also known as corrective action. Adjusting information has been studied as reputation repair rather than adjusting information. Researchers have treated expression of sympathy and corrective action as reputation repair strategies and studied them as part of that research. We do know there is great value to the organization and stakeholders when management expresses concern for victims and explains what actions are being taken to prevent a recurrence of the crisis (Cohen 1999; Fuchs-Burnett 2002; Patel & Reinsch 2003; Sellnow, Ulmer, & Snider 1998). The research justifies Sturges' (1994) belief that

adjusting information is an essential part of crisis communication and is second in importance to instructing information.

Of the strategic research, the vast majority emphasizes reputation repair in one way or another. Because an entire book could be devoted to reviewing this research, I provide just a sample of the major works. This section reviews the various research streams in crisis reputation repair. The review divides the research by research methods. Following Stacks (2002), three categories of research methods are used: (1) informal, (2) transition, and (3) formal. Informal research methods are subjective, provide little control over variables, and are not systematic in the collection and interpretation of the data. The results provide an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon but do not permit generalization or prediction. Content analysis is the transition method between formal and informal research. The method is informal but data can be randomly sampled and counted. Content analysis can answer questions of fact. Lastly, formal research involves the controlled, objective, and systematic collection of data. Generalizations and predictions can be made from formal research.

*Informal Crisis communication research and reputation* The informal crisis communication research related to reputation repair utilizes the case study methods. The researchers are heavily influenced by rhetoric in both theory and method. Rhetorical theories are used as analytic tools to dissect and to interpret cases and to generate insights into crisis communication. Three schools of thought dominate the informal research: (1) corporate apoloia; (2) image restoration; and (3) renewal.

*Corporate apoloia* Apoloia is a rhetorical concept that explores the use of communication for self-defense. A person's character is called into question when she or he is accused of engaging in an action that involves wrongdoing. When one's character is attacked, one of four communication strategies can be used to defend one's character. Those four strategies are *denial* (person was not involved in any wrongdoing), *bolstering* (remind people of the good things the person had done), *differentiation* (remove the action from its negative context), and *transcendence* (place the action in a new, broader context that is more favorable) (Ware and Linkugel 1973). Dionisopolous and Vibbert (1988) presented the first published piece that explained how apoloia could be adapted and applied to corporate communication. Crises, for instance, could be viewed as wrongdoing and create the need for "corporate apoloia." The "corporation" speaks to defend its reputation.

Ice (1991), Hobbs (1995), and Ihlen (2002) are among the researchers to apply corporate apoloia to specific crisis communication cases. Keith Hearit (1994, 1995a, 1995b, 2001, 2006) is most responsible for forging corporate apoloia's place within crisis communication. For Hearit, a crisis is a threat to an organization's social legitimacy (the consistency between organizational values and stakeholder values). A crisis violates stakeholder expectations of how an organization should operate, thus calling its social legitimacy into question. Corporate apoloia is used

to restore social legitimacy. Social legitimacy is a form of reputation, making corporate apology a form of reputation defense.

Hearit integrated a number of other rhetorical ideas, such as dissociation, into a communicative framework for analyzing crisis cases. A dissociation splits a single idea into two parts. Crisis managers use dissociations in the hopes of reducing the threat a crisis poses to reputation (Hearit 1995b, 2006). For instance, one dissociation is individual-group. This dissociation argues that a person or group within the organization is responsible for the crisis, not the entire organization. The organization is not bad, just a few people inside the organization acted inappropriately. If stakeholders accept this dissociation, blame and responsibility for the crisis are deflected away from the organization as a whole to these isolated individuals within the organization.

*Image restoration theory/image repair theory* The most prolific framework for informal crisis communication research is image restoration theory, developed by William Benoit (1995, 2005). The name of the theory has evolved over the years. As late as 2005 the framework was known as image restoration theory (IRT). However, in 2008, Benoit and Pang refer to the framework as the theory of image repair discourse or image repair theory. The abbreviation and core concepts of the theory remain the same, so it will be referred to simply as IRT.

IRT begins with an attack that threatens a reputation (what Benoit terms *image*). An attack has two components: (1) an offensive act and (2) an accusation of responsibility for the act. The offensive act can be a threat to a reputation. It becomes a threat when an individual or organization is accused of being responsible for the offensive act. If there is no offensive act or no accusations of responsibility for the act, there is no reputational threat (Benoit 1995a; Benoit & Pang 2008). IRT was “crafted to understand the communication options available for those, whether organizations or persons, who face threats to their reputations” (Benoit 2005: 407). IRT was not developed specifically for crisis communication, but is applicable because a crisis is a reputation threat.

IRT uses communication to defend reputations. IRT holds that corporate communication is goal-directed and a positive organizational reputation is one of the central goals of this communication (Benoit 1995). Drawing from rhetorical and interpersonal communication (account giving), IRT offers a list of potential crisis response strategies (image restoration strategies). Table 1.1 lists and defines the IRT strategies. IRT has been applied to a vast array of crises, including corporations (Benoit 1995; Benoit & Brinson 1994; Benoit & Czerwinski 1997), celebrities (Benoit 1997), and politics (Benoit & McHale 1999). The primary communicative recommendations to emerge from IRT have been an emphasis on apology and accepting responsibility for crises (Benoit & Pang 2008).

*Rhetoric of renewal* The most recent informal line of crisis communication research is the rhetoric of renewal. What separates the rhetoric of renewal from corporate apology and IRT is its emphasis on a positive view of the organization’s future



**Table 1.1** IRT crisis response strategies*Denial*

- Simple Denial: did not do it
- Shift the Blame: blame some one or thing other than the organization

*Evading responsibility*

- Provocation: response to some one else's actions
- Defeasibility: lack of information about or control over the situation
- Accidental: did not mean for it to happen
- Good intentions: actor meant well

*Reducing offensiveness*

- Bolstering: remind of the actor's positive qualities
- Minimize offensiveness of the act: claim little damage from the crisis
- Differentiation: compare act to similar ones
- Transcendence: place act in a different context
- Attack Accuser: challenge those who say there is a crisis
- Compensation: offer money or goods
- Corrective Action: restore situation to pre-act status and/or promise change and prevent a repeat of the act
- Mortification: ask for forgiveness; admit guilt and express regret

rather than dwelling on the present and discussions of responsibility. The focus is on helping victims. The idea is that an organization finds a new direction and purpose – it grows – from a crisis (Ulmer, Seeger, & Sellnow 2007). The crisis communication strategies emphasize the future and how things will be better for the organization and its stakeholders. The rhetoric of renewal is an extension of adjusting information and is consistent with a number of IRT strategies as well.

The rhetoric of renewal is limited in its applicability. Because certain conditions must exist for the rhetoric of renewal to be viable, it is not an option in every crisis situation. Researchers have established four criteria necessary for the use of renewal: (1) the organization has a strong pre-crisis ethical standard; (2) the constituency-organization pre-crisis relationships are strong and favorable; (3) the organization can focus on life beyond the crisis rather than seeking to escape blame; and (4) the organization desires to engage in effective crisis communication. Events that occur before and during the crisis determine whether or not an effective crisis response can include the rhetoric of renewal. The rhetoric of renewal emphasizes the value and nature of a positive crisis communication – an emphasis on the future and recovery.

While the rhetoric of renewal uses case studies, it has been innovative in the use of what can be called first-person case studies. The researchers talk with the people involved in the crisis to get the crisis managers' insights into the communicative process (e.g., Ulmer 2001). Corporate apology and IRT rely on what

can be called third-person case studies. Third party data are limited to news reports and public statements from the organization. There is no contact and insights from the people managing the crisis. While both case study approaches are subjective, the first-person cases offer some unique insights into how crisis managers view the process. This approach can yield valuable insights into the decision making process of crisis managers.

*Transition crisis communication research: Content analysis* The content analysis studies share an analysis of actual messages related to crisis communication. Researchers try to illuminate how crisis response strategies are used by crisis managers. The data include media reports, messages from the organization, and messages from social media (Internet postings). Though varied, all the studies provide insights into how crisis communication strategies have been used and, in some cases, the effects of those strategies on the crisis situation.

Allen and Caillouet published two studies that examined the crisis messages from one organization (Allen & Caillouet 1994; Caillouet & Allen 1996). They grounded their analysis in the impression management literature and used this literature as the source of crisis response strategies that they termed impression management strategies. Their assumptions and strategies are similar to those found in corporate apologia and IRT. Like corporate advocacy, legitimacy was the focal point. A crisis threatens legitimacy (the view that an organization has the right to operate) and communication can be used to restore legitimacy. They argued that the crisis response strategies were impression management efforts – attempts to influence how stakeholders perceive the organization. In other words, crisis response strategies are used to shape reputations. The data included interviews with employees, official statements, and government testimony by employees. Their work was the first systematic examination of how crisis response strategies were being used by the organization.

Huang (2006) examined four different political crises involving allegations of extramarital affairs. The four cases represented different types of the same basic crisis. The media coverage was coded to evaluate what crisis response strategies were used by the politicians and the effect of the response on the tenor of the media coverage (positive or negative treatment of the politician). The idea is that the different crises would require different responses to be effective. The predictions were based on Bradford and Garrett's (1995) model for responding to charges of unethical behavior.

Huang's (2006) analysis found that the situation did influence the effectiveness of the crisis response strategies. Simply stated, some crisis response strategies are more effective in particular situations. Huang's data also presented the opportunity for the study of cultural influence, as the crises and media coverage were from China. Her results noted that culture could help to explain the utility of the transcendence crisis response strategy and the wide use of the bolstering crisis response strategy. Huang (2006) provides a much needed extension of crisis communication research beyond its Western roots.

Holladay (2009) used content analysis to examine how effective crisis managers were at getting their side of the story out via the news media. She examined crises that involved chemical accidents and the immediate news coverage of those accidents. Her results found that organizational messages were not appearing in the news coverage. In fact, the news stories rarely used an organizational member as a source for this story. The problem could be a failure to provide information to the news media in a timely fashion and/or the news media ignoring crisis response efforts from organizations. Whatever the case, organizations are failing to have their side of the story represented in the news media. The results are problematic for crisis managers because getting out “your side” of the story has long been a central recommendation for crisis communication (Lerbinger 1997; Ogrizek & Guillery 1999). The study yielded insights into how poor crisis managers were at becoming part of the crisis news coverage.

Stephens and Malone (Stephens & Malone 2009; Stephens, Malone, & Bailey 2005) extended crisis response strategies to include technical translation. They not only examined the crisis response strategies identified in earlier research, but also examined how technical information was explained in crisis responses – what they term technical translation. The technical translations could be direct (no explanation), elucidating, quasi-scientific, and transformational. Press releases, media coverage, websites, and blogs were used as data for their analyses. Their research has extended crisis response strategies beyond their traditional focus with the inclusion of technical translation. Technical information is often a vital concern given the technical nature of many crises.

Taylor and her colleagues (Caldiero, Taylor, & Ungureanu 2009; Perry, Taylor, & Doerfel 2003; Taylor & Perry 2005) have been the strongest force pushing for the inclusion of the Internet in crisis communication. This line of research examines whether or not and how organizations use their websites for crisis communication. Perry et al. (2003) established the method of reviewing corporate websites for crisis information within the first 24 hours after a news story appeared about the crisis. The Internet-based information was coded into traditional or new media tactics. Traditional tactics include news releases, transcripts of news conferences, fact sheets, memos/letters, and question-and-answer materials. New media tactics include two-way interactive communication, use of links, real-time monitoring, and video and audio effects. This initial study noted a trend of increasing use of the Internet for crisis responses across time.

Taylor and Perry (2005) refined the new media tactics and used a new label, innovative media tactics. The innovative media tactics include dialogic communication, connecting links, real-time monitoring, multimedia effects, and online chat. The same method was used for examining websites within 24 hours of a crisis news story appearing. The websites were coded for the use of traditional and innovative media tactics. The research revealed a heavy reliance on traditional media tactics. Caldiero et al. (2009) applied the analysis of crisis messages on the Internet to fraud cases. The focus was on the news releases presented during a

fraud crisis and their effect on media coverage. They found that quotations and background information from the news releases were appearing in news stories. The Internet-based news releases were acting as an information subsidy and allowing the organization to tell its side of the story.

Choi and Lin (2009) examined online bulletin board comments during a crisis. They content analyzed comments on two online parent communities in 2007 during a series of four toy recalls by Mattel. The recalls centered on lead paint from toys made in China, but included a concern with loose magnets, too. The comments about Mattel were coded for perceived responsibility for the crisis, perceived reputation, emotion, and behaviors. The emotions included anger, fear, surprise, disgust, contempt, alert, shame, worry, confusion, sympathy, and relief. The coded behaviors were return the product to Mattel, boycott Mattel products, contact Mattel, boycott made-in-China products, and take children to the doctor. Their results found that anger and alert had a significant negative relationship to reputation.

As a whole, the content analysis research demonstrates how crisis communication is being used. This research provides a clearer picture of how crisis managers are or are not using recommendations from the research. Moreover, there is an exploration of the effects of using or ignoring crisis communication advice on crisis management efforts. This exploration includes a critical examination of accepted crisis communication wisdom such as telling the organization's side of the story. For fraud crises, online news releases did present the organization's side of the story. However, for chemical accidents, the news stories rarely included the organization's voice. We also see important questions being raised, including the role of culture, the Internet, and emotion in crisis communication.

*Formal research* Formal research shares the desire to describe and to understand a topic with informal and transition research. But formal research goes further in a quest for prediction and control (Stacks 2002). Formal crisis communication research is designed to establish relationships between variables and to develop the predictive ability of crisis communication theory. Another significant difference with formal research in crisis communication is the shift in focus from sender to audience. As Lee (2004) noted, there was a need for crisis communication research to take this turn toward the audience. The informal and transition research examine the messages the crisis managers (senders) create and seek to infer effects on the audience. The formal crisis communication research is more audience-oriented. The emphasis is on how the receivers/audience react to crisis events and crisis response strategies.

The best comparison of the sender and audience-oriented perspectives is the way formal crisis communication research studies the crisis response strategies – what crisis managers say and do after a crisis occurs. This section begins with survey research examining audience perceptions of crisis response strategies. The focus then shifts to studies examining the effects of crises and crisis response strategies on the audience.

**Table 1.2** Crisis response strategies in the SCCT cluster analysis study

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1	Denial: management claims there is no crisis.
2	Scapegoat: management blames some outside entity for the crisis.
3	Attack the Accuser: management confronts the group or person claiming that something is wrong.
4	Excuse: management attempts to minimize crisis responsibility by claiming lack of control over the event or lack of intent to do harm.
5	Justification: management attempts to minimize the perceived damage caused by the crisis.
6	Ingratiation: management praises other stakeholders and/or reminds people of past good works by the organization.
7	Concern: management expresses concern for victims.
8	Compassion: management offers money or other gifts to victims.
9	Regret: management indicates they feel badly about the crisis.
10	Apology: management accepts full responsibility for the crisis and asks stakeholders for forgiveness.

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*Crisis response strategies* An important outcome of the informal and transition crisis communication research was the creation of lists of crisis response strategies. These crisis response strategies are used in formal, transition, and informal crisis research projects. The research generally has a sender orientation because the concern is with defining the crisis response strategies that the crisis manager (sender) might use. The formal research shifts focus by examining how receivers react to the crisis response messages.

Coombs (2006) had respondents (receivers) rate a list of ten crisis response strategies for its emphasis on protecting the victims in the crisis (accommodative) and the organization's perceived acceptance of responsibility for the crisis. Table 1.2 presents a list of the crisis response strategies used in the study. A cluster analysis found the ten strategies grouped into three clusters: deny, diminish, and deal. The deny cluster seeks to prevent any association of the crisis with the organization. The diminish cluster tries to reduce the amount of organizational responsibility and/or the severity of the crisis. The deal crisis takes actions to help the victims in some way and is perceived as accepting responsibility for the crisis. Surveys were used to determine how receivers perceived the crisis response strategies.

Huang, Lin, and Su (2005) asked public relations professionals in Taiwan to evaluate crisis response strategies. The methods included the collection and analysis of survey data about the various strategies. The data were used to create groupings of strategies. Five groupings appeared: concession, justification, excuse, diversion, and denial (refer to table 1.2 for details on the groupings). The groupings reflected the accommodative-defensive continuum (protecting victims verses self-interests) found in the Western crisis communication writings. A second continuum fit as well, specification to ambiguity – the amount of detail in the response.

Huang et al. (2005) argue that the specification-ambiguity continuum reflects Chinese cultural values. While the sample was composed of potential crisis managers, the research sought to organize the crisis response strategies by how people perceived the strategies.

*Audience effects crisis communication research* The audience effects crisis communication research seeks to understand (1) how stakeholders perceive and react to crises and (2) how crisis response strategies affect those perceptions and reactions. The audience effects crisis communication research is dominated by two perspectives: (1) attribution theory and (2) contingency theory.

*Attribution theory overview* Attribution theory is a social-psychological theory that attempts to explain how people make sense of events. The idea is that when an event happens, especially a negative event, people try to determine why the event occurred. People will make attributions of responsibility for events based on limited evidence. The general attribution is that responsibility lies with the person involved in the event (internal) or environmental factors (external). For instance, a car skids off the road and hits a tree. The cause might be driver error (internal) or ice on the road (external).

According to Bernard Weiner (1986), one of the main proponents of attribution theory (AT), attributions of internal or external responsibility shape affective and behavioral responses to the person involved in the event. It is logical to extend AT to crisis communication. Stakeholders will make attributions of crisis responsibility – was it the organization or environmental factors? The need to understand the factors that shape people's attributions and reactions to crises is what makes AT approaches audience-oriented. Those attributions will shape affect and behaviors directed toward the organization in crisis (Coombs 1995, 2007a). The AT-based crisis research is audience-centered because it attempts to understand how various factors in the crisis situation shape the crisis attributions stakeholders might make about the crisis.

Early applications of AT to crises can be found in the marketing literature and help to inform situational crisis communication theory (SCCT). SCCT is rooted in AT and efforts to translate its ideas into crisis communication (Hazleton 2006). This section begins with a discussion of the early application of AT to crisis through marketing research, and then moves to a discussion of SCCT.

*Early attribution theory applied to crisis through marketing* Mowen and his colleagues (Jolly & Mowen 1985; Mowen 1979, 1980; Mowen, Jolly, & Nickell 1981) applied AT to product recalls from a marketing perspective. Their focus was on factors that influenced how people perceived the recalling organization. Their factors included speed of the response, if the response was considered socially responsible, and prior recalls. Prior recalls did intensify negative perceptions of the recalling organization. This result is consistent with AT, especially Kelley's (1971) work with the consistency principle. Past recalls establish a pattern of

behavior by an organization – the organization consistently has problems with its products – that intensifies the negative perceptions about the recall.

The perception of the recall as socially responsible has the clearest application to communication. An organization would want people to think its response to the recall was socially responsible. The perception of social responsibility in the response is facilitated by a fast response and the government commenting that the response was socially responsible (Jolly & Mowen 1985; Mowen et al. 1981). Crisis managers would want a quick response and to find third parties ready to endorse the response as socially responsible. This pioneering research, however, was limited to product recall responses which would be related predominantly to product harm crises.

Later research extended AT to product tampering (Stockmyer 1996), accidents (Jorgensen 1996), and unethical behavior (Bradford & Garrett 1995). Stockmyer (1996) found that the emotion generated by a product tampering crisis influenced purchase intentions. Jorgensen (1996) established the link between internal crises and attributions of crisis responsibility and that a full apology reduced negative emotions for a severe accident crisis. Bradford and Garrett (1995) demonstrated that the nature of the unethical situation (the degree of responsibility) helped to determine which crisis response strategies would be most effective – the nature of the crisis situation influences the effectiveness of the response. This early research was conducted in marketing where communication was one variable among many. Communication researchers made crisis response strategies *the* variable as they explored the links to AT and crisis communication in more depth.

*Situational crisis communication theory* Coombs and his colleagues began the development of SCCT in 1995. The premise was very simple: crises are negative events, stakeholders will make attributions about crisis responsibility, and those attributions will affect how stakeholders interact with the organization in crisis (Coombs 1995; Coombs & Holladay 1996; Schwarz 2008). SCCT is audience oriented because it seeks to illuminate how people perceive crises, their reactions to crisis response strategies, and audience reactions to the organization in crisis. The nature of the crisis situation shapes audience perceptions and attributions. Hence, efforts to understand how people perceive crisis situations are audience centered. The idea is to understand how people make attributions about crises and the effects of those attributions on their attitudes and behavioral intentions.

The core of SCCT is crisis responsibility. Attributions of crisis responsibility have a significant effect on how people perceive the reputation of an organization in crisis and their affective and behavioral responses to that organization following a crisis. A crisis is a threat to an organization's reputation (Barton 2001; Dowling 2002). Reputation matters because it is an important intangible resource for an organization (Davies, Chun, da Silva, & Roper 2003; Fombrun & van Riel 2004). Moreover, crises can generate negative affect and behavioral intentions toward an organization. Crisis responsibility is a major factor in determining the threat posed by a crisis. The initial SCCT research sought to identify the factors that shape



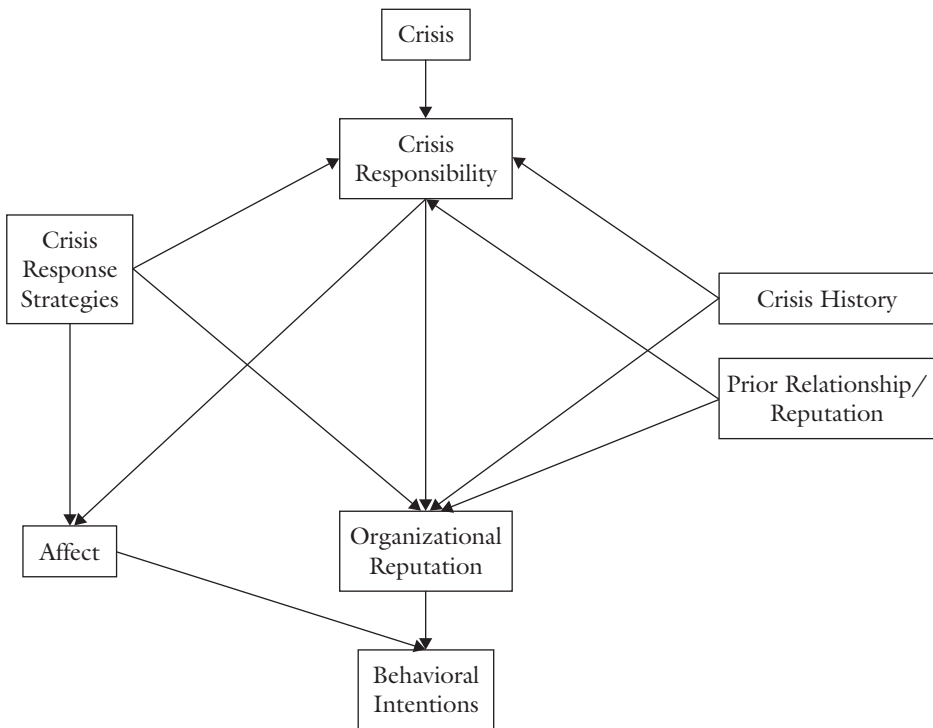
crisis responsibility and the threat posed by a crisis (Coombs 1995; Coombs & Holladay 1996, 2001, 2002).

SCCT proposes a two step process for assessing the crisis threat. The initial step is to determine the frame stakeholders are using to categorize the process. SCCT works from a grouping of three crisis types: victim (low crisis responsibility/threat), accident (minimal crisis responsibility/threat), and intentional (strong crisis responsibility/threat). The three categories represent increasing levels of attributions of crisis responsibility and threat posed by a crisis. Determining the crisis type/frame establishes the base threat presented by the crisis. The second step is to determine if any of the two intensifying factors exist. The intensifying factors alter attributions of crisis responsibility and intensify the threat from the crisis.

Currently, two intensifying factors have been documented: (1) crisis history and (2) prior reputation. Crisis history is whether or not an organization has had similar crises in the past. A history of crises increases the threat from a crisis. As noted earlier, past crises help to establish a pattern of “bad behavior” by an organization. Hence, stakeholders attribute greater crisis responsibility when past crises exist (Coombs 2004b). Prior reputation is how well or poorly an organization has treated stakeholders in the past – the general state of its relationship with stakeholders. Organizations with negative prior reputations are attributed greater crisis responsibility for the same crisis than an organization that is unknown or has a positive prior reputation (Coombs & Holladay 2002, 2007). By increasing attributions of crisis responsibility, the intensifiers increase the threat from a crisis. Only one of the intensifiers needs to be present to alter the threat a crisis poses. Figure 1.1 illustrates the key variables and relationships in SCCT.

SCCT has not limited itself just to reputation as a crisis communication outcome. Other crisis outcomes include affect and behavioral intentions. Along with Jorgensen (1996), McDonald and Härtel (Härtel, McColl-Kennedy, & McDonald 1998; McDonald & Härtel 2000) conducted some of the initial research into anger and crisis. This is consistent with Weiner’s (2006) view of attributions of responsibility leading to specific affect. Coombs and Holladay (2005) examined a number of crisis types for their ability to generate sympathy, anger, and *schadenfreude* (taking joy in the pain of others). The most compelling result was the link between anger and crisis responsibility. Not surprisingly, anger increases with attributions of crisis responsibility.

Affect also has been linked to behavioral intentions (Jorgensen 1996). The behavioral intentions include purchase intention and negative word-of-mouth. Negative word-of-mouth is particularly problematic because the effects could outlast memories of the crisis. Messages posted online, for instance, can remain for years, while people’s memory of a crisis fades after a few months. Coombs and Holladay (2007) posited the negative communication dynamic. The idea is that anger from a crisis leads to an increased proclivity towards negative word-of-mouth as well as reduced purchase intention. The data supported the existence of the negative communication dynamic and provided more insight into the role of affect in crisis communication. Anger is the motivator that moves people to action. In



**Figure 1.1** Model for the situational crisis communication theory variables

the case of the negative communication dynamic, that action is relaying negative messages to others about the organization in crisis.

Crisis managers utilize the threat level to determine the appropriate crisis response (Coombs 2007c). SCCT argues that every crisis response should begin with instructing and adjusting information, two concepts discussed earlier in the chapter. Instructing information tells stakeholders how to protect themselves from a crisis. Examples include information on what product to return in a recall or how to evacuate an area during an industrial accident. Adjusting information helps stakeholders to cope psychologically with a crisis. Expression of concern or sympathy, basic information on the crisis event, and any corrective actions to prevent a repeat of the crisis would qualify as adjusting information (Coombs 2007b; Sturges 1994). Once adjusting and instructing information are provided, crisis managers can attempt reputation repair efforts.

SCCT divides the crisis response strategies into three primary strategies (deny, diminish, rebuild) and one supplemental strategy (reinforcing). Deny strategies attempt to prove the organization had no responsibility for the crisis. Either the crisis did not happen or someone else was responsible for the event. Diminish strategies seek to minimize the organization's crisis responsibility and/or reduce the perceived seriousness of the crisis. Rebuild strategies are very accommodative

and seek to improve perceptions of the organization through compensation and/or apologies. Reinforcing strategies try to add positive information about the organization by praising others (ingratiation) and/or reminding people of past good works by the organization (bolstering). Reinforcing strategies would seem odd if used alone and are opportunity strategies (Coombs 2006). Rather than being a primary strategy, they are best used to support the three primary strategies. Reinforcing strategies are opportunities because they can only be used when an organization has past good works and/or reasons to thank others.

The rationale and definitions of the crisis response grouping were provided in the earlier discussion of crisis response strategies and formal research. The three primary strategies vary in focus from trying to protect the organization to helping the crisis victims – the level of accommodation. Crisis managers select the reputation repair crisis response strategies based upon the threat presented by the crisis. As the crisis threat increases, crisis managers should use progressively more accommodative crisis response strategies.

The victim crisis types can be managed using instructing and adjusting information. An accident crisis can add justification and/or excuse to the instructing and adjusting information. An intentional crisis or accident crisis with an intensify factor warrants an apology and/or compensation added to the instructing and adjusting information (Coombs 2007a). Thus far, the limited research has supported the matching of crisis response strategy to the crisis threat (Coombs & Holladay 1996; Coombs & Schmidt 2000). Table 1.3 provides an overview of the major recommendations offered by SCCT.

SCCT is still developing as a theory. As Schwarz (2008) noted, there are other aspects of AT that can be incorporated into SCCT. Moreover, additional factors that have not been specified yet may shape the crisis threat, including the role of culture (Lee 2005) and visual elements in crisis media coverage (Coombs & Holladay 2008). Also, the range of communicative recommendations has yet to be addressed. These points are developed more fully in a number of the chapters in Part VII of this *Handbook*. Other researchers have examined crisis communication using an AT framework and have reported findings consistent with SCCT (e.g., Dawar & Pillutla 2000; Dean 2004; Klein & Dawar 2004; Lee 2004).

*Contingency theory and crisis communication* Contingency theory is a grand theory of public relations that explains the degree to which an organization uses an advocacy or accommodative response to conflicts with stakeholders (e.g., Cancel, Cameron, Sallot, & Motrook 1997; Cameron, Pang, & Jin 2008). Contingency theory is associated most strongly with Glen Cameron and is a very complex conceptualization of public relations. As a grand theory, contingency theory seeks to explain how public relations as a whole operates. More specifically, it helps us to understand what guides policy-level decisions an organization makes about goals, alignments, ethics, and relationships with publics and other forces in its environment (Botan 2006). Historically, grand theories try to explain an entire discipline and can be adapted to specific areas of the discipline.

**Table 1.3** SCCT recommendations

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- 1 All victims or potential victims should receive instructing information, including recall information. This is one-half of the base response to a crisis.
  - 2 All victims should be provided an expression of sympathy, any information about corrective actions, and trauma counseling when needed. This can be called the “care response.” This is the second-half of the base response to a crisis.
  - 3 For crises with minimal attributions of crisis responsibility and no intensifying factors, instructing information and care response is sufficient.
  - 4 For crises with minimal attributions of crisis responsibility and an intensifying factor, add excuse and/or justification strategies to the instructing information and care response.
  - 5 For crises with low attributions of crisis responsibility, and no intensifying factors, add excuse and/or justification strategies to the instructing information and care response.
  - 6 For crises with low attributions of crisis responsibility and an intensifying factor, add compensation and/or apology strategies to the instructing information and care response.
  - 7 For crises with strong attributions of crisis responsibility, add compensation and/or apology strategies to the instructing information and care response.
  - 8 The compensation strategy is used anytime victims suffer serious harm.
  - 9 The reminder and ingratiation strategies can be used to supplement any response.
  - 10 Denial and attack the accuser strategies are best used only for combating rumors and/or challenges to the morality of an organization’s behaviors.
- 

Contingency theory is being adapted to develop a line of inquiry involving crisis communication.

Stance is the key variable in contingency theory. The stance is how an organization responds to competition and conflicts with other parties. Stances are placed on a continuum anchored by advocacy and accommodation. Advocacy is when an organization argues for its own interests, while accommodation is when the organization makes concessions to the other parties. The stance an organization should take depends on the nature of the public relations situation. Sometimes an organization needs to be accommodative, while at others it may need to favor advocacy (Cameron et al. 2008).

Contingency theory draws on over 80 variables to help predict what stance should be used in a particular situation. Predisposing variables shape stances prior to the situation and represent “predisposed” stances. In other words, an organization will have a default stance. Predisposing variables include organizational characteristics, PR department characteristics, and individual characteristics (Cancel et al. 1997; Shin, Cameron, & Cropp 2006). Situational factors, if they are strong enough, can alter an organization’s stance. The situational factors can be divided into five external factors and seven internal factors (Shin et al. 2006). The complexity of contingency theory is drawn from trying to understand the

**Table 1.4** Internal and external factors in contingency theory*Internal variables\**

- Organization characteristics
- Public relations department characteristics
- Characteristics of dominant coalition
- Internal threats
- Individual characteristics
- Relationship characteristics

*External variables\**

- Threats
- Industry environment
- General political/social environment/external culture
- External public

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\* These are variable labels and each label contains multiple variables. See Cameron et al. (2008) for a complete list of the variables.

relationships between its many variables. See Table 1.4 for a list of the external and internal factors.

A number of studies have begun applying contingency theory to crisis communication (e.g., Hwang & Cameron 2008; Jin & Cameron 2007; Jin, Pang, & Cameron 2007; Pang, Jin, & Cameron 2004). The research has noted the similarity between the stances and the crisis response strategies from IR and SCCT (Pang et al. 2004). All share accommodation as an underlying dimension. Contingency theory examines threat differently from SCCT. Contingency theory uses a threat appraisal model that utilizes threat type and threat duration to determine the threat level. Threat type is whether the crisis is internal or external to the organization, while threat duration is whether the crisis can be short term or long term. Jin and Cameron (2007) found that an internal, long-term threat posed the greatest threat and that a more accommodative response is favored when the threat is high.

The threat appraisal also includes the affective response by integrating emotion into the crisis communication process (Cameron et al. 2008; Jin & Cameron 2007). While similar to SCCT in some respects, the contingency theory approach to crisis communication offers a number of additional variables to consider when trying to select an appropriate response to the crisis. The final part of this section will consider how contingency theory and SCCT offer a promising synthesis of ideas suggested by some researchers (Holtzhausen & Roberts 2009).

*Future of formal audience effects crisis communication research* One limitation of grand theory is that it provides a generic explanation that is then applied to specific aspects of a discipline. Middle range theories, to borrow the language of sociologist Robert Merton (1968), are more useful in understanding specific aspects

of a discipline. Botan's (2006) strategic theories are akin to middle range theory because they involve the execution of grand theory. The grand theory provides the framework for integrating ideas and the middle range theories provide ways to examine these ideas.

Contingency theory offers a useful integrative framework but SCCT, as a middle range theory, is useful to explain audience effects crisis communication research as well. More precisely, SCCT can be used to operationalize, in the crisis communication context, the critical variables identified by contingency theory. It is a distinct possibility that the variables of contingency theory will vary in relevance and operationalization for different public relations phenomena. SCCT provides a more context specific framework for operationalizing and organizing the variables for crisis communication.

Two points will be used to illustrate the potential for integration: stances and threat. The stances and crisis response strategies share a concern for accommodation but do not overlap completely. The contingency theory stances are grounded in conflict, but not all crises have a strong conflict component. For crises that stem from conflict, the stances would provide a more appropriate set of communicative options, while the crisis response strategies would be more appropriate when conflict is not a major component of the crisis. More work is needed to integrate the two into a master list of crisis response strategies and recommendations for when each would be appropriate.

Although both theories are driven by threat, they operationalize it differently. This leads to what can appear to be disparate advice. Contingency theory has found that external threats create greater situational demands than internal crises, while SCCT finds that crises with an internal focus can be more threatening than external crises (Coombs & Holladay 1996, 2002; Jin & Cameron 2007). The difference is the nature of the threat and the types of crises. Contingency theory looked at the threat in terms of the situational demands for resources, while SCCT focuses on the reputational threat posed by the crisis. In different crises, those threats need not be the same. The Jin and Cameron (2007) study used activist attacks as the external threat and employee rumors for the internal threat. For SCCT, rumors are considered easier to address than challenges, thus, the results are actually consistent (Coombs 2007b). Further investigation is warranted to map crisis types and how they affect the results and prescriptions of contingency theory and SCCT. Perhaps a fusion can eventually be achieved to form a new theory.

There is a specific value in integrating SCCT and its AT roots into crisis communication research. Marketing researchers have a history of utilizing AT in their crisis research (e.g., Mowen 1980; Klein & Dawar 2004). The common connection in AT provides a similar set of variables and relationships that makes the crisis communication in marketing and communication easier to integrate and compare. While operationalization may vary, the basic variables remain the same, providing some mechanisms for comparing the results and constructing the data for evidence-based crisis communication (Coombs 2007a). For instance, Laufer

and Coombs (2006) were able to use AT as an organizing framework for synthesizing the results on crisis research related to product-harm crises into a set of evidence-based recommendations.

### Post-crisis communication

Post-crisis communication covers the time period after a crisis is considered to be resolved. The focus on managing the crisis is over, but managing the effects of the crisis continue. Given that it can be difficult to precisely locate when a crisis is over, post-crisis communication is largely an extension of crisis response communication coupled with learning from the crisis.

*Continuation of crisis communication* Post-crisis communication heavily uses stakeholder reaction management communication. As an organization returns to normal operations, stakeholders must be updated on the business continuity efforts. Employees, suppliers, and customers all want to know when “normal” operations will occur and require regular updates on the situation. Organizations may need to cooperate with investigations, generate their own reports, and/or issue their reactions to investigation reports from external agencies such as the government. Investigations are an extension of information about the crisis. The final reports are very important when they are the first documented evidence of the cause of the crisis. The reported cause could raise a new round of concerns for the organization that demand a response. An organization must deliver all “promised” information. If stakeholders requested information during a crisis and were promised that information later, the organization must deliver on that promise or lose trust from the stakeholders.

Memorials and commemoration are distinct forms of adjusting information that extend well beyond the crisis. A physical memorial might be created, such as the one to the bonfire victims at Texas A&M University or the victims of the West Pharmaceutical explosion in Kinston, North Carolina. Or there may be memorial services held on anniversaries. There is a case where after a hundred years an industrial accident is still remembered annually in Germany. What role will the organization play in the memorial and commemorations and how will it communicate about these events? Providing psychological support for victims, including employees, is another way that adjusting information extends into the post-crisis phase. People need information about such programs.

Reputation repair continues in the post-crisis phase as well. Renewal is an example of how reputation repair efforts extend beyond the crisis. The focus of renewal is the future and rebuilding. It could take months or years of communicative efforts to rebuild a reputation. Consider the years it took Tyco to recover from the crisis of its leadership siphoning millions of dollars from the company. A new CEO, new ethics officer, and new ethics program were part of the changes that needed to be communicated to stakeholders. Hence, the discussion of reputation repair in the previous section is applicable here as well.



*Organizational learning* A common statement in crisis management writings is that crises are a perfect learning experience. After the initial focus on managing the crisis, people realize there is a problem and a need for change (Kovoor-Misra & Nathan 2000). A crisis provides an opportunity to evaluate what an organization has been doing, including what led to the crisis and the crisis management effort. Crisis expert Ian Mitroff has emphasized the need to learn from crises (e.g., Mitroff, Pearson, & Harrington 1996). However, the problem is that organizations are reluctant to learn from crises (Roux-Dufort 2000). People get defensive and resist intensive investigations into the crisis. Reviewing what happened and why becomes a threat as people fear blame and punishment.

Effective crisis learning reflects the crisis knowledge management aspect of crisis communication. Crisis learning experts note the need to collect information about the crisis and to analyze that information. A multifunctional team (composed of people from various departments) should run the crisis post-mortem and collect information from a wide range of stakeholders, including external stakeholders (Elliot, Smith, & McGuiness 2002; Kovoor-Misra & Nathan 2000). Management must model and promote an open climate that focuses on lessons learned that is not blame oriented. Learning must be rewarded and evaluated. Were the lessons implemented? Was the implementation successful? Were people rewarded for the change? Learning audits can be used to determine if the lessons are still being used and reinforced after the initial implementation (Kovoor-Misra & Nathan 2000). Clearly, there are a variety of crisis knowledge management communication issues that are emerging from crisis learning. It is an area that still lacks development and exploration (a topic raised in chapter 38).

## Conclusion

This chapter progressed from a definition of crisis to crisis management to crisis communication. The progression was necessary as the definitions of crisis and crisis management help to establish what constitutes crisis communication – its parameters. This exploration demonstrates that crisis communication is multifaceted rather than just one thing. Crisis communication occurs during all three phases of crisis management: pre-crisis, crisis response, and post-crisis. Across these three phases crisis communication tends to emphasize either crisis knowledge management or stakeholder reaction management.

The most heavily researched area of crisis communication is stakeholder reaction management. Within stakeholder reaction management, the bulk of the research is on strategic crisis communication concerned with the crisis response. The attention is warranted because the crisis response can improve or worsen the crisis for the organization and/or its stakeholders. Moreover, stakeholders carefully scrutinize the crisis response. Even with this intense focus there is still much more to be learned about the utility of crisis communication during the crisis response. The other areas of crisis communication have had minimal attention and are ripe

for additional research. The parameters of crisis communication are rather broad, leaving ample room for additional research, a point illustrated by the chapters in this *Handbook of Crisis Communication*. After reading this volume, you will realize there is still much to be learned about crisis communication that can help make crisis management more effective at protecting stakeholders and organizations.

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