Unit – 10: PUBLIC RELATIONS AND CRISIS COMMUNICATION

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10.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to:

- understand what is meant by crisis communication
- describe the relevance of public relations in any crisis situation
- identify the appropriate tools that are required to be used in a crisis situation
- understand the different approaches that are applied to crisis communication.

10.2 INTRODUCTION

Perhaps there is no organisation in the world that would not have faced a troublesome situation since its inception. Obstacles, challenges and difficulties for any enterprise are inevitable. But, if these obstacles or challenges do not get resolved over a period of time, it can do serious damage to an organisation's growth and reputation leading to a situation of crisis. To handle such crisis proper management and communication is essential. Therefore, public relations play a crucial role to solve a crisis situation.

This unit will help the learner understand the meaning and relevance of crisis communication and the role of public relations to manage crisis in any organisation. The different tools to handle crisis situations will be discussed. Also, the role of social sciences and its different approaches to crisis communication will be looked into.

10.3 MEANING OF CRISIS COMMUNICATION

Before one understands what is meant by crisis communication, one needs to learn the meaning of crisis. A crisis is a situation that threatens or violates the expectations of stakeholders and impacts the organisation's performance. Crises possess serious risks and dangers to any organisation, but for this danger to accelerate there have to be a series of problems that has been occurring over a period of time. These problems may have not been that great enough, but it may have reached a crisis point almost unnoticed. Also, this could be a sudden event that may have caused serious damage to an organisation. To be considered as a crisis, the possible harm should damage the organisation's financial positioning, its reputation and performances. Crises always involve people and interrupt the regular flow of command in day to day activities of an organisation.

Definitions of Crisis

Various academics have explained in different dimensions of what exactly constitutes a crisis. Let us look into some of the definitions:

Ole R. Holsti, who has authored research papers on crisis theory, defines crisis as, "Situations characterised by surprise, high threat to important values, and a short decision time".

Steven Fink, the author of Crisis Management: Planning of the Inevitable, defines, "Crises are forewarning situations that run the risk of escalating in intensity, falling under close media or government scrutiny, interfering with normal operations, jeopardising organisational image and damaging a company's bottom line".

Therefore, crises adversely affect the reputation of the organisation,

its products and services, financial stability and the security of all the employees, other stakeholders and the community at large. It is a major occurrence with a potential negative outcome affecting the organisation, its publics, products, services and reputation. A crisis interrupts normal business transactions and can sometimes threaten the existence of the organisation.

Causes of crisis

There are different possible causes of crisis. Let us look into it.

1. Physically Violent Events: Natural disasters or acts of nature, that leads to damage of properties. Some physically violent crises can be a result of intentional acts too. These acts are committed by an individual or a group of people. **For Example:** acts of terrorism, which may result into loss of lives or lead to hostage situations.

2. Physically Non – Violent Events: A collapse of an industry or an economy, inflation rates, recession are **examples** of non violent crisis. Some non violent crises can be caused by an act of nature too, such as spread of epidemics like Ebola or Swine Flu. Intentional non violent activities include spread of malwares and virus in computer systems, non ethical hacking, death or hostage threats etc.

3. Unintentional Events: These acts are neither intentionally caused by human activities nor are they caused by acts of nature. Such events can include a fire caused by a short circuit, accidents, explosions or even chemical leaks. It can also have non violent consequences such as the delay of product or stocks of products due to stock unavailability, market crashes or business failures.

In general for any organisation, a lack of crisis planning leads to crises. Management teams of any organisation should closely observe the operational environment and be prepared for anticipating any crisis during its business operations. Crises come in many ways. Public relations deal

with public crises. Here, public can be both external and internal. Any public relations professional and the management team can predict and anticipate the probable crises the organisation can come across. This explains that any organisation can plan for an unforeseen crisis.

Thus, by now, the learner may have understood what exactly a crisis is and what the probable causes of the crisis are. You may have also observed that a crisis has a great chance of recovery and public relations professionals have a crucial role to manage anyone affected by a crisis while the management team tries to resolve the crisis. This art of managing the various publics in times of a crisis which involves the dissemination of information required to address the crisis situation is crisis communication. Crisis management on the other hand, is a way to deal and combat the crisis and reduce the damages done. Effective crisis management includes crisis communications. This process will not only eliminate the crisis, but,its also likely to bring the organisation a more positive reputation than it had before the crisis.

Definitions

Crisis management is the process of strategic planning for a crisis that eliminates risk, resolves the problem and uncertainty from the negative outcomes. This allows the organisation to be in greater control of its own in future.

Crisis communications is the dialogue between the organisation and its publics,whereby, the dialogue comprises detailed strategies and tactics to minimise the damage that has been done to the image of the organisation.

10.4 PUBLIC RELATIONS IN A CRISIS SITUATION

When a crisis occurs in any organisation, communication must be established with different news media, social media, internal and external publics and any other stakeholders who are associated with the organisation. All these communications should begin as soon as possible following the issue of a notification that a crisis has occurred. The primary function of

public relations is dealing with the publics. Public relations professionals, build relationships with specific publics. Consistent proactive public relations programmes can in the long run prevent crisis. It can also lead these targeted publics to be supportive and understanding in times of the organisation's crisis. Mutual trust and goodwill is primarily the focal point of any public relations.Two-way communication between the organisation and the public often avoids crises or undergo crises of less intensity and duration. Organisations with a crisis management and/or crisis communications plan comes out of a crisis with a more positive image. After all, public relations is concerned with an organisation's reputation. It exists to create and enhance a positive reputation. Many a times, an organisation doesn't consider utilising public relations until it is in a crisis. Then it wants a speedy recovery.

In fact, W. Timothy Coombs, a crisis communication expert and professor of Illinois State University, listed out the crisis communication strategies organisation uses. These are defensive to accommodative in nature. Check out the list illustrated below:

1. **Attack the accuser:** The party that claims a crisis exists is questioned and its explanations are faulty in nature.
2. **Denial:** The organisation denies the existence of any crisis.
3. **Excuse:** The organisations doesn't take responsibility for the crisis.
4. **Justification:** The crisis is tried to minimise with reasoning such as there was minimum damage. Sometimes, the other stakeholders are blamed.
5. **Ingratiation:** Actions are taken to pacify the publics involved.
6. **Corrective Action:** Appropriate measures are taken to repair the damage and prevent a similar crisis in the future.
7. **Full Apology:** The organisation takes full responsibility and issues an apology.

There are five stages of crisis any public relations professional has to experience while executing a communication plan:

1. **Detection:** The detection phase is the pre- crisis stage for any organisation. This phase comes with certain warning signs. These are ongoing problems with the organisation or the industry, these are noticeable signs any organisation shouldn't be avoiding. In fact, it is a warning sign. If the problem is taken care of at this stage and precautionary steps are taken to prevent it, probably then, the organisation will successfully eliminate the problem in becoming a crisis in the future. Crisis detection also lets the key personnel be immediately notified of a crisis. An organisation has a considerable advantage if it knows about a crisis before its publics do, especially the news media. This gives the organisation time to draft a statement, make preparations for a news conference, notify the crisis team, and call in spokespersons.

2. **Prevention/Preparation:**Ongoing public relations programmes and regular two-way communications build relationships with targeted publics. This helps in the prevention of crisis and also reduces the capacity of a full blown crisis. Any organisation must not only do what is right. It will also have to keep the targeted public informed that it is taking appropriate action. If the organisation does not reveal its vision, ethical and professional business goals and practices the publics will never know.

3. **Containment:**In any organisation during the time of a crisis situation, it is of utmost importance for any public relations professional and the management team to make a continuous effort to limit the duration of the crisis or keep it from spreading any further.

4. **Recovery:**This phase involves the restoration of normalcy in any organisation that has or is undergoing a crisis situation as soon as possible. It refers to resuming the organsiation's business operations and winning the confidence of the key publics.

5. **Learning:**In this phase, the organisation assesses, examines and evaluates the crisis. The organisation identifies what was lost, what was gained and the result of the organisation's performance during the crisis situation.

10.5 PUBLIC RELATIONS TOOLS FOR CRISIS COMMUNICATION

Measuring the degree of the crisis situation and after a thorough analysis, the management and communication team needs to come up with a crisis management plan where a well planned communication plan is chalked out for the public relations professional in order to engage with the various key publics.

There are **three key elements** that promote a successful communication during any crises:

1. The existence of a communication plan as a part of the overall crisis management plan.
2. The ability to assemble a crisis handling team as immediately as the crisis occurs.
3. The use of a single spokesperson during the crisis.

In order to execute the communication plan, the key factor to be considered is to build a sustainable relationship with the key publics. Proper tactics need to be used. Let us look into some of these programmes and tools.

1. **Media relations:**The PR professional requires to build a positive relationship with the news media so that they know the professional and the organisation are reliable, professional, accurate, and ethical. News releases, media tours, news conferences are some of the tactics used.

2. **Community relations:**Need to build a trustworthy relationship with community leaders, organisations, families, individuals. Tactics may include public service announcements, corporate social responsibility

activities, fellowships, welfare schemes.

3. **Internal relations:**An organisation will fail to survive or make profits if the employees and staff and other internal stakeholders are not satisfied being associated with the organisation. They need to be felt a part of the organisation. Tactics would be incentives, use of acknowledgment e-mail and other social media, contests, awards, gifts.

4. **Consumer relations:** Building a mutual bond between the organisation and its customers. A returns and refund policy, sales advantages and a complaint system are possible tactics.

5. There can also be programmes for government relations, international relations, investor relations, and others. An organisation depends on these publics for survival because they have some stake in the organisation.

HOW TO COMMUNICATE DURING A CRISIS

1. The key publics are the priorities
2. Taking responsibility for the crisis
3. Being factual and honest
4. Never saying “no comments”. Respond to questions. Be accesible
5. Update the key publics with information consistently
6. Have a single spokesperson
7. Monitor news media

10.6 RHETORICAL AND SOCIAL SCIENCE APPROACHES TO CRISIS COMMUNICATION

Public relations professionals can benefit from many theories in the social sciences while managing a crisis communication situation. The

theories applied to crisis communications are often theories in communications. In terms of academic research, the field of public relations is relatively new. Various theories suggest ways that are either likely to prevent crises or enable organisations to recover from crises more swiftly than organizations without those characteristics. Strong among all the theories is the necessity for planning ahead. Also prominent is maintaining strong relationships with publics.

James Grunig and Todd Hunt in 1984 developed four models of public relations that describe the various management and organisational practices. These models serve as guidelines to create programmes, strategies, and tactics.

The four models are:

1. **Press Agentry/ Publicity Model:** Persuasion is used to shape the thoughts and opinions of key audiences. In this model, accuracy of information is not a priority, and organisations do not seek audience feedback or conduct audience analysis research. It is a one-way form of communication. This model may not work in a crisis situation.
2. **Public Information Model:** The second model seeks to disseminate information as truthfully and accurately as possible. The public relations professionals put forth both the organisational and public interest. However, its still a one way form of communication.
3. **Two Way Asymmetric Model:** The model is in favour of the organisation's perspective. Although two way communication is established, but, an engagement of dialogue occurs in order to persuade the key publics to agree with the organisation's point of view.
4. **Two Way Symmetric Model:** The model argues that a public relations professional should serve as a mediator between the organisation and its key publics, instead of a persuader. They are negotiators and use communication to ensure that all involved parties benefit and not just the organisation. The term symmetrical is used as the model creates a mutually beneficial situation. This model is best suited for crisis communication.

SITUATIONAL CRISIS COMMUNICATION THEORY (SCCT)

The situational crisis communication theory proposed by W. Timothy Coombs & Sherry J. Holladay in 1995 is an extension of the attribution theory. The fundamental idea behind SCCT is that organisations should use strategic communication to respond to a crisis situation based on an understanding of how the public hold responsible for the crisis. If the public perceives a crisis to be more intentional, then, they attribute more responsibility to an organisation. It is based on who was responsible for causing the crisis as well as how significant the threat is to the business's reputation.SCCT is audience-oriented theory. To rebuild an organisation's reputation the organisation needs to take responsibility for the crisis and offer apologies or compensations to the ones affected by the outcome.

APOLOGIA THEORY

Apology and apologia are not the same. Apologia, as another communication response strategy, is more than apology. By using apologia, the organisation explains and claims to that it is right. Through apologia an organisation or a person defends itself for creating a more favourable content for the allegations. Four strategies can be used when an organisation is accused: Denial (not involved in any wrong doing) bolstering (reminding of good things that has been done) differentiation (remove the action from its negative content) and transcendence (place the action in a new and favourable context.

IMAGE RESTORATION (REPAIR) THEORY

William Benoit developed the theory, arguing that the image restoration strategies are reputation repair strategies and they can be used after a crisis situation occurs in any organisation. He believed that successful crisis resolution needs honest and ethical communication. Image restoration theory offers strategies such as denial, evading responsibility, reducing offensiveness, corrective action and mortification. The core concept of the theory states that an attack can threaten the organisation's image. Two components must be present in a given attack to the image of an individual

or organization (1) The accused is held responsible for an action, and (2) the act is considered offensive. The theory uses communication to defend its reputations.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q. 1. What is meant by crisis communication?

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Q. 2. What is meant by crisis management?

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Q. 3. List a few tools of public relations.

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CASE STUDY

McDonald's coffee case

In 1994, international fast food chain McDonald's got severe negative publicity from the American media, when a 79 year old Stella Leiback won a multi-million dollar lawsuit against the company because she suffered third degree burns from a scalding cup of coffee She suffered from burns in her pelvic region when she accidentally spilled hot coffee in her lap after purchasing it. The lawsuit was settled at $640,000. McDonald's claimed that the outcome of the case was a coincidence, and held responsible the loss to poor communications and strategy by an unfamiliar insurer representing a franchise. Liebeck's attorney, Reed Morgan, and the Association of Trial Lawyers of America defended the result in Liebeck by

claiming that McDonald's reduced the temperature of its coffee after the suit, although it is not clear whether McDonald's in fact had done so. It is said that the company thereafter has received over 700 complaints and has settled over $500,000 for scalding injuries.



10.7 LET US SUM UP

- Crises are forewarning situations that run the risk of escalating in intensity, falling under close media or government scrutiny, interfering with normal operations, jeopardising organisational image and damaging a company's bottom line.
- Crisis management is the process of strategic planning for a crisis that eliminates risk, resolves the problem and uncertainty from the negative outcomes. This allows the organisation to be in greater control of its own future.
- Crisis communications is the dialogue between the organisation and its publics, whereby, the dialogue comprises detailed strategies and tactics to minimise the damage that has been done to the image of the organisation.
- The differents causes of crisis are Physically Violent Events, Physically Non – Violent Events, Unintentional Events**.**
- The Different Stages of Crisis are Detection, Prevention/preparation, Containment, Recovery and Learning
- Media Relations, Community Relations, Internal Relations and Consumer Relations are some of the important PR tools.
- JM Grunig and Todd Hunt's four models of Public Relations are Apologia theory, Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) and Image Restoration (repair) theory.



10.8 FURTHER READING

1. Fearn-Banks, Kathleen (2011).Crisis Communications: A Casebook Approach. Fourth Edition. New York : Routledge.
2. Newsom, Doug, Turk V, Judy, Kruckeberg, Dean (2000). This is PR: The Realities of Public Relations. Seventh Edition. Singapore: Wadsworth Thomson Learning.
3. Wilcox, Dennis, Cameron, Glen, Reber, Bryan (2015). Public Relations: Strategies and Tactics. Eleventh Edition. Essex: Pearson.



10.9 CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Ans to Q. No 1: Crisis communications is the dialogue between the organisation and its publics, whereby, the dialogue comprises detailed strategies and tactics to minimise the damage that has been done to the image of the organisation.

Ans to Q. No 2: Crisis management is the process of strategic planning for a crisis that eliminates risk, resolves the problem and uncertainty from the negative outcomes. This allows the organisation to be in greater control of its own future.

Ans to Q. No 3: Some of the PR tools that can be used for managing a crisis situation are : Media Relations, Community Relations, Internal Relations, Consumer Relations and Government Relations.



10. 10 MODEL QUESTIONS

A. Very Short Questions

Q1. What is meant by crisis? Differentiate between crisis management

and crisis communication?

Q2. Why is public relations essential for handling a crisis situation?

B. Short Questions (answer each question in 150-200 words)

Q 1. How should a public relations professional communicate during a crisis situation?

Q 2. Explain the various tools one a public relations professional can use while designing a communication plan.

C. Long Questions (answer each question in 300-500 words)

Q 1. Explain the five stages of crisis.

Q 2. According to you, which theory or model is the most appropriate to apply in any crisis situation. Elaborate.

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