Theoretical Approaches to and Sociocultural Perspectives in Crisis Communication

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This chapter summarizes various definitions of crisis—definitions that indicate the multiplicity of perspectives in the growing specialty of crisis communication. It outlines types of crises and describes key communication theories (e.g., the theory of image restoration discourse and the situational crisis communication theory) and related theoretical formulations that undergird crisis management (e.g., the blog-mediated crisis communication model) that practitioners will continue to find useful in crisis response. Finally, it addresses the interplay between societies' dominant cultural practices and their influence on crisis communication. It illustrates that interplay primarily from the Asian perspective, noting that the high-context attributes and Confucian principles dominant in Asian and sub-Saharan African cultures result in nuanced, indirect crisis communication, whereas communicators in dominant United States' culture and those of the United Kingdom, France, and Germany, with their low-context attributes, are wont to be direct and sometimes confrontational in their communication.

Introduction

The nearly two dozen cases in this book, all of which are based on events or incidents that occurred after 2006, have stoked the interest of communication practitioners, teachers, and students worldwide in how best to communicate *in* or *about* a crisis. Each case is presented in accordance with the best practices in the field; that is, a background or analysis of each case is provided, then the initial response of major stakeholders is presented and quickly coupled with the goals, objectives, strategies, and tactics used by the key stakeholders. Because each case focuses on a crisis, we begin our analysis by describing that concept and identifying some of the key theories that serve as "field guides" for communication practitioners as they develop or implement plans for responding to crises.

This chapter iterates the importance of theories, which many communication practitioners use, sometimes unwittingly, in a crisis. The lessons learned from each crisis are outlined as take-away gems. The next chapter takes readers to some of the nuts and bolts of crisis communication—setting the stage for providing prompt, effective responses to crises.

This chapter has five sections. The first outlines the importance of theory to crisis communication. The second and third summarize sample definitions, characteristics, and types of crises. The fourth identifies key theories that undergird the use of crisis communication strategies. And the fifth presents the interplay between a sociocultural environment and crisis communication.

Theory and Crisis

Why are theories important to our understanding of how we can communicate effectively *in* or *about* a crisis? Consider: You are about to launch a major communications campaign, this time on a nebulous, shifting terrain. You now have persuasive data on your publics: their psychographics (e.g., attitudes, use of social media, and quality and patterns of social relationships); and their demographics (e.g., ethnicity, education, and income). And you know you still need to amass, perhaps in short order, additional information on the campaign to ensure that its implementation is not tantamount to a fool's errand. So you analyze a welter of data to decipher relevant information. Enter theory.

Our knowledge of relevant communication theories ensures that all possible contingencies have been considered well before a rollout. That essential knowledge of theory, Toth (1986) noted, "can provide a framework for coping with reality" (p. 30). From the standpoint of "normal science," as Kuhn (1996), a philosopher of science, wrote, theory is used in "puzzle-solving" (pp. 35–42); that is, to answer questions and to solve specific scientific problems. Similarly, from the standpoint of the social sciences, a general theoretical perspective "allows scientists to go about solving the puzzles they continually generate" (Eckberg and Hill, 1979, p. 929). That perspective can enable us to do some stocktaking even as various facets of our campaign are being implemented—sometimes simultaneously. How? Because theories are indeed a lighthouse in the dark, a Global Positioning System, of sorts, such as a Garmin or a TomTom; they tell us precisely how we can most effectively implement our programs and how we can identify, segment, and connect strategically with, say, our publics—without possibly veering off course. Theories are indeed our field guide. In essence, they are also searchlights that ensure that we have a step-by-step approach to understanding, anticipating, and addressing sticky campaign or communication situations. Observations (or phenomena) on our campaign are described (what is happening here?) and accounted for and explained (what are these campaign-related phenomena and activities? How do they occur? And why and when do they occur?). We want a clear idea of what to expect as our campaign takes on a life of its own—

that is, to be better able to predict processes and constraints on outcomes; to hedge our bets, if necessary; to have some order in and control of each phase of the campaign; to identify how actions undertaken in one phase and the outcomes they engender relate in an organized way to other actions in and outcomes from other phases. Thus, the practitioner has reliable descriptions and systematic explanations of possible campaign processes and outcomes. Those explanations contribute to a better understanding of how one part of the campaign or program relates to (or interacts, intersects, or unifies with) other parts. They offer compelling interpretations of the significance of each turn and each outcome. Armed with theories, practitioners are not, as it were, operating in the dark, in a vacuum. In fact, the practitioner's actions can contribute in meaningful ways to theory building in public relations, as Botan (1989) noted:

> When a public relations practitioner offers an explanation for why a public relations effort succeeded or failed, he or she is taking the first step in propounding a theory. The generally accepted explanations and ways of doing things that have evolved over the years in public relations are therefore rudimentary theories.
>
> (Botan, 1989, p. 102)

Since about the mid-1990s, the scholarly literature on crisis communication has identified several theories that communication practitioners find useful in formulating and identifying appropriate crisis-response strategies, in predicting constraints on crisis interventions, and in implementing and evaluating crisis-communication programs. Unbeknown to some such practitioners, however, their actions were already well grounded in theories, even as crisis-communication researchers (e.g., Coombs, 1999, 2007a; Sisco et al., 2010) bemoan the fragmentation of theoretical constructs in our specialty and the paucity of investigations of their implications for or direct relevance to crisis communication.

Two crisis-communication theories—both of which will be addressed in some detail in a subsequent section of this chapter—are the theory of image restoration discourse, which focuses on what corporations can say when faced with a crisis (Benoit, 1995, 1997; Harlow et al., 2011); and the situational crisis communication theory (SCCT) (Coombs, 2007a, b, c; Coombs, 2009; Coombs and Holladay, 2010), which states that some public relations crises are best resolved if organizations adopt specific crisis-response strategies in their attempt to restore their reputations. Coombs (1995) and Coombs and Holladay (1996) illustrate, for example, how attribution theory is used to classify crises, resulting in categories that, in turn, help practitioners determine the response strategies that they should adopt.

Technology company Foxconn's rash of 15 suicides—from that of a 19-year-old male employee on January 23, 2010, through that of the most recent

in February 2011—falls into Coombs's (2007a) preventable crisis cluster in which the company's community raises the question: Why so much pain at this Shenzhen plant? That question is framed within the context of SCCT. And organizational responses are appropriately identified. Little wonder that more organizations are benefiting from effective crisis communication and crisis management, even from their unwitting applications of theoretical perspectives to communicating and managing their crises. But, first, what is a crisis?

Crisis: Definitions and Characteristics

Let us examine briefly the situation in which the world's largest contract manufacturer of electronics found itself early in 2010. Foxconn Technology Group, whose parent company is Taipei-based Hon Hai Precision Industry Co. Ltd, has more than 920,000 employees in China and 420,000 in a sprawling factory complex in Shenzhen, China's coastal city in Guangdong province. That complex also has dormitories in which the company's migrant work force lives in cramped quarters, separate from families. The company's clients include Apple, Cisco, Dell, Hewlett-Packard, IBM, Nokia, and Sony. During the first six months of 2010, beginning on January 23, 16 Foxconn employees at the Shenzhen factory attempted suicide, 12 others killed themselves, and an additional 20 were stopped from committing suicide. That was a major crisis, compounded by three factors. First, austere, bare-bones employee living quarters, which, some argued, exacerbated an intimidating corporate environment. Second, perhaps because of the preceding factor, employees' mental health was in question. Third, the company's hard-charging, take-no-prisoners, suffer-no-fools-gladly culture projected an organizational environment not at once conducive to employee well-being and productivity. News reports dubbed the culture militaristic and the management non-human-based, resulting in burnout among employees ("Foxconn case," 2010). But because Foxconn produces electronic parts for high-end technology companies, it requires excellence in productivity and zero tolerance for fallibility. The crisis that emanated from that corporate culture illustrates Hermann's (1963) working definition of an organizational crisis as that which "(1) threatens high-priority values of the organization, (2) presents a restricted amount of time in which a response can be made, and (3) is unexpected or unanticipated by the organization" (p. 64).

Developing effective definitions of crisis has been a dynamic effort for decades, with early definitions being event- or incident-oriented and some current definitions taking a process-oriented approach, even as both approaches overlap and are complementary (Jaques, 2009). Snyder et al. (2006) state that the vague definitions of organizational crisis result in the lack of a unifying conceptualization of the concept. Even so, the numerous definitions of crisis have a common theme: unexpected events that engender unwholesome outcomes. Some such definitions and descriptions:

- Barton (2008) defines a crisis as "*any event that can seriously harm the people, reputation, or financial condition of an organization*" (p. 3).
- Coombs and Holladay (2010) identify the following key descriptors of a crisis: "*unpredictable, expectations, serious impact/negative outcomes,* and *perception*" (p. 238). They also state, "The term *crisis* should be reserved for serious events or threats."
- Fearn-Banks (2011) says that it is a "major occurrence with a potentially negative outcome affecting the organization, company, or industry, as well as its publics, products, services, or good name. A crisis interrupts normal business transactions and can sometimes threaten the existence of the organization" (p. 2).
- Fink (2002) states that a crisis "is *not* necessarily bad news—merely reality" (p. 1), an observation reflected in his definition of crisis as "an unstable time or state of affairs in which a decisive change is impending—either one with the distinct possibility of a highly undesirable outcome or one with the distinct possibility of a highly desirable and extremely positive outcome. It is usually a 50–50-proposition, but you can improve the odds" (p. 15).
- Fishman (1999) outlines five characteristics of crises: events are unpredictable; threats are evident on an individual or organization; causes of the crisis are discernible; events are time-sensitive; and occurrences are a dynamic, multidimensional set of relationships.
- Gilpin and Murphy (2010) define crises specifically from a two-pronged perspective: perception and effects. They write: "Thus how an event is perceived and how it affects the people linked to an organization, both individually and as a group, will determine whether or not it is classified as a crisis and how it is subsequently handled" (p. 14). They note that crises can also be defined from a number of perspectives that include psychological attributes (how do managers feel about their involvement in a crisis?); cause (is it natural, technological, confrontational, malevolent, skewed management values, deceptive, or untoward management conduct?); and business impacts (what public perception or business shift does it engender?)
- Heath and Millar (2004) adopt a two-dimensional, rhetorical definition of crisis: technical or managerial (for example, accidents, human errors, or threats to the environment); and communication response (for example, how an organization prepares for, accommodates to, and recovers from disruptive outcomes).
- Maitlis and Sonenshein (2010) say that crises are "often situations characterized by ambiguity, confusion, and feelings of disorientation" (p. 552).
- Ogilvy Public Relations Worldwide identifies eight characteristics that underlie all corporate crises: events that occur suddenly and are driven by media exposure; information that is short on relevant facts of crisis; flow

of events that hampers management's understanding of crisis and its persuasive response; loss of control over perception of crisis and its impact on company; scrutiny from corporate insiders and outsiders, including the media, government regulatory agencies, and activist groups; onset of corporate siege mentality that encourages company officials to hide behind legal aspects of crisis, making the company more vulnerable to the crisis; panic that paralyzes corporate decision making; and issue that tends to be resolved in the public arena to the satisfaction of outsiders, including the media, government regulatory agencies, and activist groups, and to the detriment of the company itself (Tortorella, 2004).

- Pearson and Clair (1998) define it strictly within an organizational context as "a low-probability, high-impact situation that is perceived by critical stakeholders to threaten the viability of the organization and that is subjectively experienced by these individuals as personally and socially threatening" (p. 66).
- Roux-Dufort (2007, 2009) takes a processual approach to crisis, viewing it as both an event and a process of the gradual organizational accumulation of weaknesses, imperfections, and vulnerabilities at different levels of the organization. Those pre-existing conditions produce a triggering event that leads to a crisis. Crisis is, thus, conceptualized as an organization's proneness to institutional and environmental prerequisites, which lead to "the transition from a situation of normality to one of imbalance and then to a disruption" (Roux-Dufort, 2009, p. 5); and reflect the managerial ignorance that precedes the eruption of an event. Earlier, Turner (1976), in writing about "the accumulation of unnoticed events that are at odds with beliefs shared on the dangers and means of avoiding them" (p. 381), spelled out some of the fundamentals of the processual theory of crisis. Research by Shrivastava et al. (1988) built upon that perspective, which views crises as combinations of several loosely coupled and interdependent events, each one preparing the ground for the other to occur in a chain reaction.
- Snyder et al. (2006) define "organizational crisis as an extraordinary condition that is disruptive and damaging to the existing operating state of an organization. An organization crisis, if ignored or mismanaged, will threaten competitiveness and sustainability of the affected entity" (p. 372).
- Ulmer et al. (2011) view crises as "dangerous moments or turning points in an organization's life cycle" (p. 3). Their working definition of organizational crisis: "a specific, *unexpected*, and *nonroutine* event or series of events that create high levels of uncertainty and simultaneously present an organization with both *opportunities* for and *threats* to its *high-priority goals*" (p. 7).
- Zaremba (2010) identifies three "recurring characteristics" of the definitions of crises as involving atypical events that might be predictable but not expected when they occur, as damaging to an organization or

individual, and as necessitating communications with various audiences to minimize the fallout from the crises. He says it is "an anomalous event that may negatively affect an organization and requires efficient organizational communication to reduce the damage related to the event" (p. 21).

It is clear from the preceding list that, at the very least, a crisis is a situation or event that can be organizationally unnerving, disruptive, or interruptive, even as the Chinese-language symbol for crisis, *wei ji*, means *both* a crisis and an opportunity (Ulmer et al., 2011). And, as Augustine (2000) observes, "Almost every crisis contains within itself the seeds of success as well as the roots of failure" (p. 4), making the harnessing of that success and the understanding of that failure pivotal to effective crisis management. But a crisis, depending on type, can be more manageable than others, a subject to which we now turn.

Types of Crises

As the literature on crisis and crisis communication shows, there have been a number of descriptions and characterizations of what is or constitutes a crisis. That scholarly dynamic is indicated in the categories or typologies of crises. The diversity of scholarly disciplines involved in research in crisis communication may explain "'the tower of Babel' effect" (Shrivastava, 1993, p. 33) on, and the difficulties in reaching a common understanding of, the definitions of terms and concepts in the specialty (Jaques, 2009).

Coombs (2007a, 2008) and Coombs and Holladay (2002, 2010) draw upon attribution theory to develop three types or clusters of crises: (*a*) victimized, that is, by natural disasters, rumors, and workplace violence; (*b*) accidental, such as challenges and technical-error accidents; and (*c*) preventable, such as human-error accidents and organizational misconduct. Earlier, Coombs (1995) developed a two-by-two crisis-type matrix, grounded in attribution theory and based on intentionality and locus of control: (*a*) accidents (unintentional and internal), (*b*) transgressions (intentional and internal), (*c*) faux pas (unintentional and external), and (*d*) terrorism (intentional and external).

Lerbinger (1997) identifies seven types of crises subsumed under three causes: (*a*) nature and technology, both crises of the physical world, as illustrated in the still-mysterious explosion that killed 11 workers on a British Petroleum drilling rig off the Louisiana coast on April 20, 2010; (*b*) confrontation and malevolence, both crises of the human and social environment, as illustrated in protest movements in Iran over the 2009 presidential election that declared President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad victorious over challenger Mir Hossein Mousavi, and in Thailand over its Red Shirt–Yellow Shirt confrontation; and (*c*) concern with corporate profits at the expense of other stakeholder interest, deception, and misconduct, all crises

of management failure, as illustrated in the global financial crisis that began in the summer of 2007 and precipitated by subprime mortgages in the United States.

Linke (1989) takes a significantly different approach to developing a typology of crises, grounding his in the amount of time an organization has to respond to a crisis: (a) exploding; (b) pressing, that is, immediate; (c) building; and (d) continuing.

Similarly, Mitroff (2004), Mitroff and Anagnos (2001), and Mitroff and Pearson (1993) developed a six-item typology of crises based on causes: (a) economic attacks, (b) information attacks, (c) organizational malfunction, (d) catastrophic malfunction, (e) "psycho" attack, and (f) occupational health crises.

Skinner et al. (2007) have a three-pronged typology of crises: (a) immediate, which happens suddenly and unexpectedly; (b) emerging, which brews over time; and (c) sustained, which persists for months or years.

Ulmer et al., (2011) categorized crises according to intent: (a) intentional crises, such as terrorism, sabotage, workplace violence, poor employee relationships, and unethical management, tend to be human-provoked; and (b) unintentional crises, such as natural disasters, disease outbreaks, unforeseeable technical interactions, and product failure, tend to be outside the realm of intentional human provocation.

Finally, Zaremba (2010) provides a summary of categories of crises culled from works of several writers: natural disaster, management/employee misconduct, product tampering, megadamage, rumor, technical breakdown/accident, technical breakdown/not entirely accidental, challenge, human error, and workplace violence.

The triggering events for crises are numerous and diverse, making each crisis situation an instructive experience for organizations as they attempt to align the crisis type with the appropriate theory-informed response. Crisis-communication managers have at their disposal a number of theories that can provide the guiding light to what such response *should* be.

Crisis-communication Theories

Avery et al. (2010) reported that a majority of the research studies on crisis management and communication in public relations over an 18-year period was guided by two primary theories: Benoit's (1995, 1997) theory of image restoration or repair, and Coombs's (2007a) situational crisis communication theory. Both those theories, as well as others that undergird crisis communication, have been well documented (e.g., Brinson and Benoit, 1999; Brown and White, 2011; Coombs, 2007a; Coombs and Holladay, 2002; Coombs and Schmidt, 2000; Hearit, 1999; Jin and Liu, 2010; Marsh, 2006, 2010; Meng, 2010; Zaremba, 2010); therefore, their key features and their illustrations will be summarized here in short order.

Theory of Image Repair Discourse

An inevitability of the corporate environment is an image crisis; therefore, this theory is grounded in two key assumptions: (a) that communication is goal-directed activity, and (b) that an important goal of communication is to maintain a favorable reputation. According to this theory, a starting point in resolving a crisis is to understand its causal factors as well as the nature of the threat. Benoit's (1995, 1997) image restoration theory holds that, because image and reputation are essential to organizations and individuals, any (offensive) act that undermines an organization's standing with its stakeholders could be addressed through an image restoration discourse to develop and understand images that respond to such an image crisis. The theory extends Ware and Linkugel's (1973) theory of *apologia*, which identifies four factors in self-defense: denial (this company had nothing to do with the alleged act); bolstering (this company is a significant employer in this community; differentiation (this company is expanding its services rapidly to better serve you, our customers who are our top priority); and transcendence (this company's rapid growth in its services and its growing pains can translate into more community involvement and support).

Benoit's (1995, 1997) expansive theory focuses on message options—that is, the content of crisis communication or the messages that an organization uses to change stakeholders' perceptions when confronted with a crisis. According to Benoit, five general self-defense strategies underpin the messages: (a) denying charges, accusations or allegations; (b) evading responsibility for an offensive act; (c) reducing the severity of the offensiveness of a wrongful act; (d) taking corrective actions; and (e) admitting or confessing wrongdoing and begging for forgiveness (mortification).

Relating this theory to Foxconn's experience leads us to the following conclusions:

- The company neither denied accusations and allegations of its high-pressure work environment nor the severity of the issue. And Foxconn did not shift the blame for the crisis to someone else.
- The company did not evade its responsibility; it accepted it. The events on its plant were not a consequence of defeasibility (that is, lack of information or of the ability to respond to them). In fact, Foxconn's immediate response included welcoming Apple's then-chief operating officer Tim Cook to a fact-finding mission on the Shenzhen plant in June 2010; hiring counselors for its 24-hour care center; and attaching large nets to factory buildings, hoping that that device would serve as a deterrent to further suicide attempts.
- The company did not diminish the offensiveness of the incidents, either by minimization by saying that they were infrequent or an aberration or, by attacking its accusers, or by proposing up front that it would compensate victims' families.

- The company took immediate corrective action, promptly seeking employee contributions to resolving the embarrassing weakness of its corporate culture and seeking the services of mental-health counselors to help create an environment more conducive to employee well-being. And its U.S. public relations firm disseminated timely information on corrective measures being undertaken.
- The company did not seek mortification; it did not apologize for the realities of the cookie-cutter environment in which its operations are conducted, even as it ensured that the situations in the workplace that led to a spate of suicides were being improved.

On balance, Foxconn's eclectic response strategies helped create a public perception of a responsive company whose quick action was in the overall interest of its employees.

Situational Crisis Communication Theory

Coombs's (2007a, 2008, 2009) situational crisis communication theory (SCCT), grounded in attribution theory (Claeys et al., 2010; Coombs, 2007a; Coombs and Holladay, 2005, 2010), posits an audience-centered approach to crisis communication, focusing on how stakeholders respond to a crisis and on the best response strategies organizations can adopt to restore their reputations. Different crises generate different predictable levels of responsibility for the crises. The more the cause of a crisis is perceived as beyond an organization's or an individual's control, the lower the attribution of responsibility for a crisis to that organization or individual; higher perceptions of controllability lead to higher attributions of responsibility for a crisis. As Jeong (2009) and Zaremba (2010) state, stakeholders' attributions of responsibility in crisis communication are affected by relationship history (that is, a negative relationship leads to additional damage to corporate reputation), external versus internal control (that is, whether a crisis is caused or controlled by people internal to or external to the organization); and personal control (that is, whether someone close to the crisis could have controlled it).

SCCT segments crises into three types of clusters—victim (low attributions of crisis responsibility), accidental (moderate attributions of crisis responsibility), and preventable (high attributions of crisis responsibility)—each of which requires specific organizational responses grouped into three postures: deny, which indicates low concern for crisis victims; diminish, which seeks to reduce organization's vulnerability to the crisis; and deal, which indicates high concern for victims and high acceptance of responsibility. As Coombs (2008) notes, the deny posture includes attacking the person or group that claims that an organization has engaged in a wrongful act; the diminish posture is used by the crisis manager eager to minimize organizational responsibility or the perceived damage it may have caused; and the deal

posture includes ingratiation (crisis managers remind stakeholders about the positive traits of organization), concern, compensation, and apology.

SCCT also matches crisis managers' response recommendations to crises, by situations: for rumors, use denial strategies; for product tampering, use instructing information; for accidents and human error, deal strategies; to victims of crisis, demonstrate concern (Coombs, 2008).

The resolution of Foxconn's suicide crisis was a throwback to Coombs's (2007a, 2008) SCCT: the company assumed neither the deny nor the diminish posture; rather, it adopted pointedly the deal posture, demonstrating utmost, urgent concern for victims and their families. The causes of the crisis (hallmarks of attributions of responsibility for a corporate culture) evoke anger toward the event (for example, through employee protests) that in turn leads to motivation for action (for example, Foxconn's retaining WPP Burson Marsteller to investigate and implement corrective measures). The degree to which Foxconn did all of those things was at some level consistent with some of the key elements of SCCT; it demonstrated the latter's application to a situation that had major implications for corporate communications.

The remainder of this section highlights four related theoretical formulations that are used by crisis managers to undergird crisis communication—and, in one instance, to help them track blog-mediated organizational rumors and resolve such "victim crises" (Coombs and Holladay, 2010, pp. 248–249) in the blogosphere, which is exploding with activities large and small.

Blog-mediated Crisis Communication Model

Granted, models and theories have overlapping features; however, the former do not necessarily have explanatory and predictive characteristics, two hallmarks of *all* theories. But the descriptive and interactive features of models are so palpable that the blog-mediated crisis communication (BMCC) model, for example, helps crisis managers identify influential external blogs and bloggers and to engage them. It places priority on using blog-mediated public relations' strategies and tactics to reach key publics associated with a crisis and to foster relationships with them in light of organizations' limited resources to address crises and to connect with those publics through the crisis-information flows generated by influential external blogs or user- or public-generated content (Jin and Liu, 2010). While understanding influential blogs (that is, blog content) is important, it is equally important that crisis-communication managers identify the dissemination process of that content, for example, whether it is through e-word-of-mouth communication.

Additionally, Jin and Liu (2010) proposed two types of blogger involvements: (a) issue involvement, which occurs when bloggers' direct or indirect experiences with an issue motivate them to talk with others about an organization to relieve the excitement or disappointment caused by the issue; and (b) self-involvement, which occurs when bloggers seek self-affirmation by

talking with others about a service, or product, thus building their credentials as leaders or authorities on the subject.

Stakeholder Theory

To the degree that a crisis is usually noteworthy largely because of its effects or consequences on an organization's diverse stakeholders, stakeholder theory is a bedrock of public relations and the fulcrum of crisis communication. And because such stakeholders have disparate concerns about, interests in, and demands on the organization, it is important that stakeholder theory be brought to bear in segmenting publics for specific forms of communication. Crisis-response strategies are invariably sensitive to the importance of stakeholders in the organization's environment. As Ulmer (2001) observes, "The benefits of investing in stakeholder relationships precrisis has profound implications for crisis-stricken organizations" (p. 593).

Freeman's (1984) seminal work on stakeholder theory concluded that because environmental "shifts" were occurring among internal stakeholders (customers, employees, and suppliers) and external stakeholders (regulatory agencies, competitors, and special-interest groups), effective organizations need to "take into account all of those groups and individuals that can affect, or are affected by, the accomplishment of the business enterprise" (p. 25). Therefore, such a list of stakeholders—what Freeman (2010) calls "the stakeholder map of an organization" (p. 67)—can enable communication practitioners to place stakeholders at the center of strategic thinking, to assign ranks to the stakeholders, and to develop a relational view of organizational communication. Crisis managers can then communicate effectively *in* or *about* a crisis. Grunig and Repper (1992) wrote: "Communication at the stakeholder stage—ideally before conflict [read: crisis] has occurred—is especially important because it helps to develop the stable, long-term relationships that an organization needs to build support from stakeholders and to manage conflict when it occurs" (pp. 126–127). Along that vein, Freeman (2010) argued that integrating stakeholder concerns into business operations makes corporate social responsibility as a distinct, separate activity moot. The point here is that adopting or disregarding stakeholder theory by crisis managers can facilitate recovery from a crisis in a turbulent organizational environment or exacerbate that crisis.

Situational Theory of Publics

Related to stakeholder theory is a theory that helps us assess the communication behaviors of different publics. The situational theory of publics tells us what stakeholders—or publics—will do if they recognize a problem (or a risk or crisis), if they perceive themselves as being involved with the problem, or if they think they are constrained in resolving the problem. Will

a stakeholder who recognizes a risk merely process or actively seek information on it? How likely will risk messages—that is, those on communicating the seriousness of the safety, environmental, or health risks associated with consuming or using a product, on engaging in an activity, or on buying into an idea—encourage stakeholders to seek more information about threats? And what additional measures will risk communicators take in response to stakeholder risk concerns and needs?

Crisis and risk communications are so tightly woven into each other in practice and are both so undergirded by the situational theory of publics that one can serve as a substitute for the other. The definition of risk communication clarifies that interface: ". . . a dialogue between organizations creating risks and the constituents that must bear the risk . . . [O]rganizations explain what the risk is . . . while risk bearers try to voice their concerns and fears about the risk" (Coombs and Holladay, 2010, p. 219). The theory purports that certain factors—problem recognition, level of involvement, and constraint recognition—influence whether individuals will merely process information about a problem or whether individuals will actively seek out more information about a problem. Thus this theory is the degree to which a perceived risk can evolve into a problem and quickly morphs into a crisis (problem recognition), and calls for an assessment of an organization's strategic responses to that problem (constraint recognition), and necessitates assessing organizational involvement with that problem (level of involvement), followed by stakeholders' processing or seeking information on the problem or risk.

Rhetorical Stasis Theory

This theory falls squarely in the genre of rhetorical theories of self-defense whose strategies Ware and Linkugel (1973) articulated as (a) denying, that is, stating categorically that the alleged wrong act did not occur; (b) bolstering, that is, reinforcing favorable traits to encourage stakeholders' positive feelings toward an alleged wrongdoer; (c) differentiating, that is, redefining the facts of a larger context; and (d) transcending, that is, persuading stakeholders to look at a crisis from a broader perspective of the organization's overall strengths.

Stasis theory helps crisis managers identify core issues in a crisis and provides a hierarchical structure for selecting response strategies to it, and for identifying specific actions within those strategies (Marsh, 2006), particularly in the theory's application to corporate *apologia*, which Hearit (1994) defines as "a defense that seeks to present a compelling counter description of organizational actions" (p. 115). (Stasis means an issue.) Marsh presents four forms of stasis: (a) stasis of fact, by which an organization acknowledges or denies its responsibility for a crisis or shifts blame to another target (did BP damage the Gulf of Mexico?); (b) stasis of definition, by which an organization places a crisis in a large, absolving context (did BP's pollution of the Gulf of

Mexico constitute a socially irresponsible act?); (c) stasis of quality, by which an organization minimizes its responsibility for a crisis (did the circumstances of this environmental crisis mitigate BP's guilt?); and (d) stasis of jurisdiction, by which we question the appropriateness of, say, the court of public opinion as the proper venue for judging crisis-related actions.

Sociocultural Contexts of Crisis Communication

Erez and Earley (1993) argue that organizational culture, aside from debates on its existence or meaning, is a product of societal culture: ". . . culture acts as a moderator in the relationship between managerial techniques and employee behavior" (p. 4). Similarly, cultures have moderating effects on organizational behavior—that is, on the attainment of organizational group goals, on intragroup communication, on group performance, and on economic incentives (or rewards) for group goal attainment, which, in turn, enhance the level of motivation (Erez and Somech, 1996).

Therefore, in the same breath, cultural differences account for communication differences. There is a growing body of research that concludes that cultural factors influence theory building and perspectives in and the practice of public relations (Botan, 1992; Grunig et al., 1995; Kent and Taylor, 1999; Kim and Kim, 2010; Rhee, 2002; Sriramesh, 2007; Sriramesh and Kim, 1999; Vasquez and Taylor, 2000), and crisis response strategies (An et al., 2010; Taylor, 2000). Communicators in dominant sub-Saharan African cultures, like those in Asia, because of their high-context attributes, are likely to engage in nuanced, indirect communications whereas those in dominant United States' culture and in the United Kingdom, France, Germany, and Switzerland, with their low-context attributes, are wont to be open and direct in their crisis communication. Several studies (e.g., Kang and Mastin, 2008; Kim and Kim, 2010; Vasquez and Taylor, 2000) have, for example, investigated the effects of most of Hofstede's (2001, 2011) and Hofstede et al.'s (2010) six dimensions of national cultures (power distance, uncertainty avoidance, individualism–collectivism, masculinity–femininity, long- to short-term orientation, and indulgence–restraint) on communication values and practices. Power distance is the acknowledgement and acceptance of unequal power distribution or status differences in a community, organization, or social setting. Examples of high power-distance countries include Malaysia, Guatemala, Panama, and the Philippines. Low power-distance countries include Austria, Israel, and Denmark.

Uncertainty avoidance focuses on how cultures respond to ambiguity, change, and uncertainties. Cultures high in uncertainty avoidance seek consensus, whereas people in low uncertainty-avoidance cultures tend to be more willing to take risks. Countries high on this index include Greece, Poland, and Belgium. Some low uncertainty-avoidance countries are Singapore and those in the West.

The individualism–collectivism dimension measures the extent to which a society encourages independent thought and action versus one that encourages interdependence and conformity. High-individualism countries include Australia, Belgium, the Netherlands, and the United States, while Indonesia, Venezuela, and Guatemala are high collectivistic countries.

The masculinity–femininity dimension refers to whether a society values masculine traits (e.g., competition and ambition) more than it does feminine traits (e.g., service to others and quality-of-life issues). Countries with high scores on the masculine index include Japan, Austria, Venezuela, Italy, and Switzerland. Those that score lowest on that index include Sweden, Norway, and the Netherlands.

Long- to short-term orientation, earlier labeled Confucian work dynamism, focuses on perseverance, sense of shame, and thrift, enabling us to pose questions such as: (a) Do I want instant or delayed gratification? (b) Are we planning for the next year or for the next five years?

Indulgence versus restraint, the newest of the six dimensions, describes indulgent cultures as primarily concerned with encouraging individuals to express opinions freely, to feel healthier and happier, and to engage in a leisure ethic, whereas restraint cultures are primarily concerned with curbing such human drives. High-indulgent nations include Venezuela, Mexico, Puerto Rico, and El Salvador; high-restraint nations include Ukraine, Latvia, Egypt, and Pakistan.

All of those dimensions influence individual communication and, in turn, organizational communication (Gudykunst, 1997), and, by extension, provide the framework for crisis communication. High power-distance countries such as South Korea, Singapore, Malaysia, Japan, and Taiwan use newscasting to convey authoritative and official narratives, whereas low power-distance countries such as Spain, the Netherlands, Denmark and Sweden use casual narratives that project more personal relationships (Kang and Mastin, 2008). Because organizations interact with culturally diverse stakeholders, they can avoid crises by acknowledging globalization, respecting the multiethnic nature of their work force, and avoiding ethnocentrism (Kent and Taylor, 1999; Zaremba, 2010). Cast against the preceding background, then, what is the interplay between cultures and crisis communication? To answer that question, the remainder of this chapter focuses on illustrations from Asia and Africa.

Illustrating Cultural Influences on Crisis Communication in Asia

It must be stated unequivocally that Chinese public relations is influenced by Western theories, concepts, and practices (Liu et al., 2009; Zhang et al., 2009) and also by the country's cultural, political, and economic environments. In September 2006, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) recalled pet foods imported from China because of reports of renal failure in some pets.

Similar recalls occurred in Europe and South Africa. The crisis came to a head in March 2007 when a Canadian-based pet food manufacturer alerted the FDA about pets' physical well-being after they had consumed pet foods made in China. The Chinese government's initial image-repair strategy was to deny responsibility for it and to shift blame to others: that the pet foods from China did not cause the deaths in pets (Peijuan et al., 2009). Such a denial strategy, as well as a distancing strategy, is effective only in cases in which there is clear, unequivocal evidence that an organization is not at fault. If, however, a company were responsible, either in part or in whole, for an incident, then denial or distancing will exacerbate the situation.

The Chinese government then engaged in bolstering, asserting that China had strict supervision of exported foods. In the same breath, the government attacked the accuser, namely, the U.S. news media. In the face of a mountain of evidence, China finally took corrective action, revoking the business licenses of two companies implicated in the export of the tainted food.

What is the cultural explanation for the initial denial of exporting toxic pet foods and the significant turnaround in responses by the same government? Within the context of the Confucian tradition, face-saving and "soft landing" are preferred to direct, brazen confrontation. And the government's attack on the media is premised on the principle of inequality in the power relationships between a government and news organizations. According to Hofstede and Bond (1987), Confucian philosophy has four principles:

1. "*The stability of society is based on unequal relationships between people . . .*
2. "*The family is the prototype of all social organizations . . .*
3. "*Virtuous behavior toward others consists of treating others as one would like to be treated oneself . . .*
4. "*Virtue with regard to one's tasks in life consists of trying to acquire skills and education, working hard, not spending more than necessary, being patient, and persevering*" (p. 8, emphasis in original).

By extension, neo-Confucian or new Confucianism not only asserts the value of the preceding centuries-old principles as geographically bound, but also seeks to advance them as a universal model for and as a contributor to a mutual understanding in a world community (Tsai, 2008).

In contrast to the preventable crisis of toxic pet foods, the Sichuan earthquake crisis in 2008 provided the Chinese government with opportunities to attract much-needed positive publicity, to improve its global image, and to translate a natural disaster into an opportunity (Chen, 2009). The government's responses (a) emphasized open, timely communication with the nation; (b) adopted two-way asymmetrical communication, by which it set and framed the agenda on the crisis; (c) defined the crisis in ways that indicated that the government was in control of the crisis; (d) sought to strengthen

stakeholder relations; (e) used the new media only moderately; (f) took action to build and cultivate relationships; and (g) sought to be compassionate and empathic toward victims.

In a factor-analytic study of Taiwan's top 500 companies' crisis-communicative strategies—the actual responses organizations use to address crises—five factors emerged, four of which were consistent with those in Western organizational cultures (Huang et al., 2005). A new, Taiwan-specific factor, diversion, indicates the Chinese emphasis on interpersonal relationships (or *quanxi*), making diversion a means of avoiding direct confrontation in the Asian context. Information strategy did not emerge as a distinct factor, suggesting that, whereas Western companies use communication for information exchange, Chinese communication is geared toward maintaining and cultivating relationships, more commonly known as *quanxi*.

Cultural influences were also brought to the fore in the aftermath of charges by both consumers and the Osaka City Hall that Snow Brand Milk Products Co., Ltd., of Japan, sold poisonous milk products in 2000. But the inflexibility of the company's culture, fueled in large measure by societal practices of high power distance, high levels of uncertainty avoidance, harmonious interpersonal relationships, and group solidarity, prevented open communication about the issue and stifled warnings from employees about a possible problem with the product (Wrigley et al., 2006). It is this interplay between cultural values and the immediate demands of crises that prompts us to consider it as a major factor in assessing the effectiveness of crisis communication and of crisis management within cultural and organizational contexts.

Confucian Work Dynamism

There is some association between primarily Confucian cultural values and economic growth in Asian economies, including those in Mainland China, Hong Kong and Taiwan (Ahlstrom et al., 2010). Thus, given the Confucian virtue of ideal human relations, characterized by the principles of "humanity" or "*ren*" and of familistic (not Western individual) patterns of decision making (Fan, 2002, 2010), concerns have been expressed about the relevance to Eastern values of the results of Hofstede's (1980) seminal survey of work-related values: the possibility that they could be culture-bound and that they reflected the imposition of "mental programming" (Yeh, 1988, p. 150) on Chinese and Japanese values (The Chinese Culture Connection, 1987; Yeh, 1988). A 22-country survey undertaken by the Chinese Culture Connection (1987) reported that an additional dimension—Confucian work dynamism—did not correlate with any of Hofstede et al.'s (2010) dimensions developed from a survey of the workplace in 50 countries and three regions, suggesting that, from the Asian perspective, it was a separate dimension in its own right. Consequently, Hofstede and Bond (1987) reported that nations that score high in Confucian work dynamism emphasized long-term characteristics such as

being persistent and thrifty, and observing order. It has also been reported that such Confucian attributes are evident as harmonious, tolerant Chinese management style, loyalty to top management, and reciprocal loyalty to productive employees and valued suppliers (Ahlstrom et al., 2010).

Similarly, Confucianism, on the one hand, has positive influences on public relations in some Asian countries (e.g., Rhee, 2002); on the other, it influences media relations negatively (Kim and Kim, 2010). The Chinese Confucian traditions tend to hinder effective crisis management and communication. Those traditions emphasize face and harmony and expect the Chinese to save face and avoid shame and conflicts (Chen, 1996; Moon and Franke, 2000). De Mente (1998) noted that Confucianism influenced South Korean business culture: "The first priority is to avoid any kind of direct confrontation . . . In business situations this may include not telling the truth about something, withholding bad news and not bringing up mistakes that have been made" (p. 55). Thus, in crises, an organization or a government that adheres to Confucian traditions tends to withhold information on a crisis from the public and attempts to resolve the crisis privately to save its own face or reputation. One example is that of Sanlu Group, which was criticized by the public for covering up a contamination issue, an action that precipitated its collapse (see Cao's chapter, "China's Sanlu's Infant Formula Proves Fatal," in this book). Another is Chinese government's covering up the outbreak of SARS in 2003. But as China evolves into an even more formidable, influential player on the global scene and engages the rest of the world more politically, it is likely that its mindset on liberalism, humanistic tendencies, and benevolent communism will also evolve to a point in which its government and people could better understand the enduring issues in Confucian traditions. Chen (2009) concluded that the Chinese government's communication in the aftermath of the Sichuan earthquake in 2008 was 100 times more effective than that of SARS in 2003, because the government "placed unprecedented emphasis on open, timely and direct communication with the publics" (p. 191).

In sum, Asia's eclectic, yet selective, use of Western and Eastern practices in crisis communication affords it the best of both worlds, formulating strategic responses to crises largely determined by the typology and cause of a crisis.

Illustrations from Sub-Saharan Africa

Crisis communication in sub-Saharan Africa, a region that shares some of the high-context cultural traits and Confucian principles dominant in Asia, is as global as it is local in both structure and delivery. Global, in that crisis managers avail themselves of all the strategic options inherent in the theories presented in this chapter, yet local, in that they are susceptible to the constraints and limitations of a communication environment influenced by cultural values. Denying, dragging one's foot, and distancing oneself from a crisis, even when those actions could be detrimental to the reputation of an

organization, are reflective of the tendency of sub-Saharan Africans not to "wash their dirty linen in public." On the other hand, making amends and taking corrective action are consistent with the African cultural value of *Ubuntu*, which translates into "Because we are one community, I am because we are." Therefore, crisis communication in sub-Saharan Africa strives for the proper balance between being forthright about a situation and sharing selective sensitive organizational information on it. At one extreme, Olaniran and Williams (2008) found that Shell Petroleum Development Company's responses to its oil spills in Nigeria's Delta region contradicted "guidelines for a relationally oriented crisis response" (p. 58). The strategies used were scapegoating, that is, blaming communities for the sabotage that led to the oil spills; and denying and evading responsibility, that is, denying responsibility for environmental pollution and degradation.

At the other extreme are Nigerian governments' communication efforts to rein in the country's ethno-religious crises, which the governments acknowledged could deepen ethnic divides in the country. Within the contexts of Benoit's (1995) and Coombs's (2007a) crisis-response strategies, the governments employed corrective actions and a deal posture. As part of their communication responses to the crisis, the governments set up commissions of inquiry, which called for memoranda, organized public hearings, and visited crises areas. Nigeria's Institute of Governance and Social Research, the Nigerian Institute of International Affairs, and the Nigerian Red Cross organized several fora, peace conferences, roundtables, and workshops on how best the country can address the ethnic crisis.

Discussion and Conclusion

This chapter presents the growing scholarship in crisis communication that offers crises managers theory- and evidence-based strategic options for building and protecting the reputations of their organizations or clients. The broad, interdisciplinary character of those options indicates the opportunities, broad interest and appeal that the specialty attracts. But the advances in crisis-communication research are not without limitations, one of which, as Shrivastava (1993) put it, is fragmentation that results from building new vocabularies and frameworks that do not cohere: "... the lack of efforts to build systematic connections with past research gives the field an ad hoc character. It is a barrier to developing cumulative understanding of crises" (p. 33). Those difficulties are also reflected in the dearth of the application of theories to crisis-communication activities. Coombs (2008) emphasizes the need to link theory more directly to practice: "Crisis communication theory should be able to tell crisis managers what to expect in a crisis and how best to respond communicatively to the crisis" (p. 263). This chapter provides theoretical guidance in that regard, noting the eminence of both Benoit's theory of image repair discourse (1995, 1997) and Coombs's (2007a, 2008) SCCT.

But the application of the crisis-response strategies indicated in the theories presented in this chapter is also contingent upon sociocultural dimensions advanced in part by Hofstede (1980, 2001, 2011). This chapter uses Asia's cultural landscape as a platform for discussing the extent to which those dimensions influence corporate values and practices. At some level, the globalizing realities of the workplace make unnecessary a rigid separation of Western and Eastern cultures. So, on the ground, crisis communication in, say, Asia integrates Western and domestic communication values; the latter in some ways are also responsive to globalizing influences. The point here is that Benoit's (1995, 1997) image-restoration strategies or Coombs's (2007a) crisis-response strategies by postures are both enriching and expanding the body of knowledge and the tools with which crisis managers fight to safeguard or enhance reputations. While both those theories are applied to crisis communication in sub-Saharan Africa, that region shows extremes in the use of management's response strategies, which depend largely on crisis type and on specific stakeholders affected by it.

The next chapter presents guidelines for developing strategic organizational plans for managing crises effectively. Key elements of such plans include crisis-management teams and crisis-operations centers. Planning for crises can be instructive to organizations whose crisis preparedness requires improvement and to those such as German nonprofit organizations that tend to be substantially lacking in crisis preparedness, with fewer than one-third using crisis plans, crisis management teams, or crisis scenarios (Schwarz and Pforr, 2011). The point here is to establish a company-wide framework that ensures that organizations can prevent some crises up front or cannot be blindsided by the occurrence, complexity, and consequences of crises, and are at the ready to respond to them.

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