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Chapter 2 Crisis Communications Theory

Read the following for discussion:

A spokesperson for a ski resort, The Summit at Snoqualmie, near Seattle, issued a statement to the news media after a 29-year-old man died on its slopes in late 2005. The statement said the man was on his own when he ventured into a closed area, where he was later found. This led the news media to conclude that he had broken rules. Later, the resort learned that he was part of a team having been invited by two experienced ski patrollers.

Later, the resort, though not responsible for the death, purchased an ad in the *Seattle Times* (6/19/06) with the headline, "The Summit at Snoqualmie acknowledges that David W. Pettigrew's tragic snowboarding accident did not result from David breaking any rules."

The first of 12 paragraphs read, "On December 7, 2005, 29-year-old David W. Pettigrew died in a tragic accident at Alpental Ski Area at the Summit at Snoqualmie. Directly following his death, statements to the press by the ski resort said David was on his own when he ventured into a closed area where he was later found. These initial statements by the ski resort were not accurate and were incomplete. They led the news media to the mistaken conclusion that David was responsible for his own death by skiing alone in a roped-off area."

Following was a quote, an apology from the general manager, who said, "We later learned the details, but unfortunately, we weren't pro-active. We didn't go back and try to get the details out that would clear David's reputation." And "… We are very sorry, and we want to set the record straight …"

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The half-page story then described how the tragedy occurred in some detail, how David's family and friends felt the news coverage tarnished his memory, and ended with about five paragraphs describing what a wonderful person David was. A photo of David was at the top of the ad.

Instructors: When discussing this, consider that the ski resort could not force the news media to cover this story after the initial news. The newspapers might print a correction, but few people read the corrections. If the newspapers said the resort told them David was in the wrong area, then the newspapers were correct; they were told that. Even if you get a reporter to do a human-interest story about the incident, you have no control of the wording, or whether the sincerity shows. So, the ad was a much stronger apology. It said exactly what the ski resort wanted, though it cost thousands of dollars. It is possible that the family would have sued if the apology was not issued, but apparently there was not such a threat, yet. You can be sure lawyers were consulted about the wording of the apology and that Pettigrew's family approved it.

Nonverbal Communication in Apology

Spokespersons making apologies use words carefully crafted, often by crisis teams or public relations professionals. Not as much care is spent on nonverbal communication but the training of spokespersons should include nonverbal.

The spokesperson must appear sincere to the public. A twitching eye can cancel all the great words to be said. On the other hand, a tear falling at the right time can be the right key. One wouldn't want to encourage a spokesperson to act or perform but if he/she tends to be emotional, let it show. Don't hold back. In the case of the Exxon Valdez oil spill in 1989, the CEO did not come to the scene because he felt "technologically obsolete." The public didn't care if he understood dispersants of oil. They really were only secondarily concerned with how it happened. What the public wanted was to see him care, to be sorry that the sea flora and fauna had been destroyed by the oil, that the fishermen had lost their livelihoods. If he had taken a dead bird in his hands and cried, history would be different.

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Exxon has spent many millions of dollars to help recover from that spill, but dollars do not make up for concern. And that concern needed to be immediate.

In the 1960 presidential elections in the U.S., John Kennedy and Richard Nixon debated on live television. This was not a crisis at first but it turned out to be a crisis for Nixon. Nixon was nervous and his face was wet with perspiration, to the public a sign of untrustworthiness. Also, his clothing was about the same color as the background wall, so he blended into the wall. On the other hand, Kennedy, experienced at debate and much more confident, was dressed in a suit that stood out from the background. He was calm, cool, and collected. And he won. Political history attributes the win largely to that debate. Their words mattered, but it's the nonverbal differences that are most remembered.

Since then, spokesperson training, not only for crises, has included how the speakers look, not just what they say. That's why candidates, newsmen, and spokespeople on U.S. television are often seen wearing red neckties. Women often wear bright colored suits. It's not that it must be red but it must stand out from the background. It should not be dull. On the other hand, it should not be so shocking that people look at the clothing and not the person, so there's a happy medium that must be discussed and determined by advisors.

Also, the clothing should fit the occasion, the crisis. Let's say the crisis is an earthquake and a public official is speaking on behalf of the city. That person should look like he was out digging for survivors, even if he was not. That means no pristine Armani suits. He must be part of the crisis recovery. He should wear a simple shirt with the sleeves rolled up.

Instructors: You can find numerous apologies on YouTube. Show them and discuss why they are or are not effective. As students view apologies, have them compare the Five W's of Apology: whether apology was needed, whether it was effectively stated, whether the right person was spokesperson, whether the apology was timely, and whether it was done in the right place and location.

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Activities

1. Consider recent crises or crises in the textbook and draft explanations that would not be full and contrite apologies, but that would be categorized as apologia theory responses.

2. How have social media impacted the excellence theory? Find examples of Model 4 practice online that did not exist prior to the development of social media. Which of the social media lends itself best to the excellence theory? Also, to the apologia theory?

3. Can you find any evidence of professional use of Model 1 of the excellence theory?

4. Read the theatre scenario in the *diffusion theory* and conceive a *diffusion of innovation theory* for some problem at your university, community, or city.

5. Some publics expect an apology sooner than "at once" and quicker than "right now." What are the problems in satisfying these publics?

Instructors: After reading this chapter, students will probably understand the various theories, but the challenge here is to apply the theories to the crisis cases in the book. The theories described were chosen because most are adaptable to more crisis communications cases. Chances are the professionals did not knowingly utilize the theories, because professionals work generally on the premise of "this worked before so let's try it again" or "this seems a good idea." The question is, "Could the professionals fighting the crisis have used a theory?" "Were procedures similar to theories?

An obvious discussion would be also, "Would a theory have enhanced the recovery process?" The Death and Injury Crises (Chapter 13) could have used apologia theory, for example. Every crisis communications planner could utilize image

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restoration theory, as, in a crisis, every organization must consider publics. Likewise, decision theory is always useful in a crisis.
Discussion can always involve who should make decisions, when decisions should have been made, how outcome might have been better or recovery faster. In other words, you are recreating the crisis scenario, as you see it. Always realize that the written cases do not always mention all variables, all matters that caused communicators to take actions or make decisions. Yet, it can be an exercise in thinking.
There are numerous theories in public relations, inter-organizational and interpersonal communications, ethics, business, which can also be introduced here according to your desires.

1. Examine organizations in the textbook that suffered news-making crises and note their compliance or noncompliance with characteristics espoused by crisis communications theorists. The following are characteristics of the excellence theory; however, characteristics can also be developed for the other theories. The study is intended to aid the understanding and discussion of crisis communications theories as they apply to each case.

    a. Was the head of communications important to top management? This can mean that the head of communications reports to the CEO, or that the top management confers with the communications head on policy matters and decision-making.

    b. Did the communications department, prior to the crisis, identify its key stakeholders and rank them in order of importance? This is important because, during a crisis, there is often not enough time to make such determinations prior to communicating. Johnson & Johnson ranked its publics prior to the Tylenol tampering crisis and was subsequently widely praised by all publics, including the media, for its handling of the crisis.

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c. Were there, prior to the crisis, communications programs designed to build relationships with all key stakeholders? Proactive public relations programs help build relationships so that, during a crisis, stakeholders are more likely to be supportive.

d. Were there strong relationships with stakeholders? Going beyond the previous questions, this probes whether an organization's communications programs were effective. Frequently, there are programs in place, but it takes a crisis to test the strength of the relationship.

e. Were there strong relationships with the news media? The Cable News Network makes every news-making crisis potentially international news. It is not always possible for an organization to develop relationships with national and international news media personnel. Nevertheless, communicators find that strong relationships with the local media pay off in national crises, because outside reporters often follow the lead of local reporters.

f. Were publics segmented into more manageable and reachable bodies for ongoing communications programs? This procedure helps the organization reach its publics more effectively and helps in the division of duties for the crisis communications team.

g. Did the organization have a CCP in place prior to the crisis? Sometimes, organizations make a CMP that does not include detailed crisis communications. The CCP should include identification of the crisis communications team, including spokespersons, duties, lists of stakeholders, background information for the media, and so on.

h. Was issues management practiced prior to the crisis? Managing issues can frequently prevent crises.

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i. Were two-way communication ideologies established prior to the crisis? Two-way communications ideologies are formed by decisions made by executives regarding the organization's policy on communicating with various publics, including the news media. For example, Johnson & Johnson's policy during the Tylenol-tampering crisis was to be open and honest with the media, medical community, consumers, and employees. Each public was encouraged to communicate its concerns and problems to the company.

3. Segment the student body of your college or university into bodies that can be reached more effectively and more directly and personally than the news media.
   Instructors: Look here for reaching students by various departments, various student organizations, living groups, commuter students by signs at bus stops, flyers on cars, etc.

Discussion and Essays

1. Does "I'm sorry" used in tweets and other social media seem insincere? Are tweets too brief to be fully expressive?

2. In apologia theory, how can an organization respond apologetically without admitting guilt? Create scenarios and discuss.
   Instructors: Similar discussions can evolve when scenarios are developed from other theories.

3. What are some examples of dissociation you can recall organizations using?

4. What are some examples of conciliation you can recall organizations using?

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5. In a crisis situation, using the image restoration theory, how could an organization determine which publics should receive which messages? Why would you send different messages to different publics?

6. For what types of crisis would the diffusion theory be most appropriate? Least appropriate?

7. What makes it difficult to use Model 4 of the excellence theory in a crisis?

8. What model of the excellence theory is likely the most popular model used during times of crisis?

9. Why do many professionals not use theory?

10. Who are some celebrities who have been in crises and issue public apologies? Were they effective? Why or why not?

11. What are examples of nonverbal communication not mentioned in this workbook chapter?

Vocabulary

apologia theory
change agents
communications ideology
conciliation
decision theory
diffusion theory
dissociation
excellence theory
image restoration theory
maximizing

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organizational ideology

RACE

redefinition

risk communications

ROPE

satisficing

segmentation

stakeholders

strategic publics

strategically managed public relations

strategy

theory

Quiz Questions

1. What is a strategy?

2. What is a theory?

3. What are two characteristics of organizations that recover well after a crisis, according to the excellence theory?

4. What are the three primary aspects of the apologia theory?

5. Which of the excellence theory models are concerned with truth?

6. Which of the excellence theory models is the practice of “flacks”?

7. Can a company or agency always utilize Model 4 if they try?

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8. What are the five steps of the diffusion theory?

9. Create a scenario for each theory.

10. How do theories relate to ethics and professionalism?

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Case: Metro Transit: Driver Shot, Bus Flies Off a Bridge

It was November 26, the day after Thanksgiving, 1998. Dan Williams, media relations specialist for Metro Transit in Seattle (a division of the King County Department of Transportation), was preparing to take his children to an afternoon movie when the phone rang. It was a reporter from the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* asking if Williams knew anything about an accident involving a bus on the Aurora Bridge (see Figure 13.1).

Williams had been with the county agency for 15 years, 12 as media relations specialist in the office of the director of Metro Transit. He was one of only two media relations specialists who reported to Ron Posthuma, assistant deputy director of Metro Transit, who reported to Director Paul Toliver.

Williams first thought that the call was routine. In a city where buses are so crucial, accidents happen. Metro Transit had 1,600 full-time drivers and 750 part-time drivers. Also, it was after 3 p.m., peak traffic hours. Approximately 1,000 buses are in operation during peak hours, most of them heading into or away from the downtown area. Because of the holiday weekend, traffic was somewhat less congested. Williams told the reporter he hadn't heard anything, but promised to get back to him. It also was not unusual to get calls about accidents from reporters because newsrooms regularly monitor (police) radio scanners.

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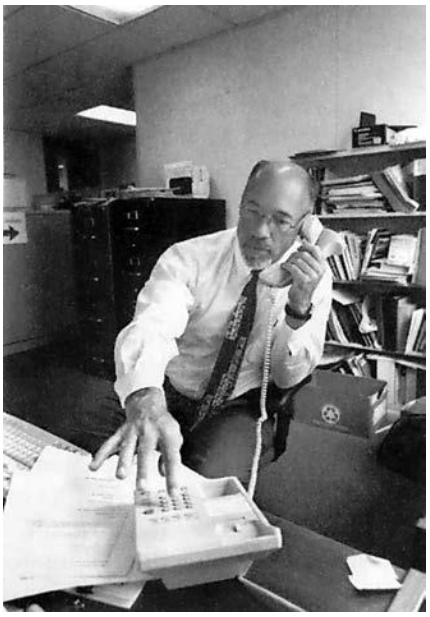


Figure 13.1 Dan Williams, media relations specialist for Metro Transit, served as primary spokesperson during the 1998 bus tragedy, in which a Metro bus driver was shot and the bus plunged off Aurora Bridge in Seattle. Reprinted with permission of Dan Williams.

"I called our control center not really expecting anything out of the ordinary," said Williams. "Our coordinators have a lot of people to notify in case of an accident, and they must also communicate by radio to personnel at the scene of the accident. Calmly, the coordinator told me that the driver of a bus southbound on Aurora Avenue had been shot, the bus veered off the bridge, the driver had been ejected and was receiving medical treatment on the roof of a building where he fell, and there were multiple injuries to passengers."

Aurora Bridge is one of the tallest bridges in Seattle, a city of bridges. It is commonly called Suicide Bridge because it is the bridge of choice for people who want to take their own lives. There were so many suicide jumps from the Aurora that the news media stopped covering them for fear that the victims, through jumping, were seeking a strange kind of publicity or fame. The

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bridge is also part of Aurora Avenue, a major thoroughfare connecting the northwest section of the city to the downtown area. On both ends, the bridge spans houses and other structures; in the center, it towers 175 feet above Lake Union (see Figures 13.2 and 13.3).

After learning of the accident, Williams said:

> My immediate reaction was to suppress whatever shock I was beginning to feel and do whatever was necessary to get to the scene as soon as possible. I made a quick call to neighbors and dropped my kids at their house. Television news helicopters were circling the accident scene, just a half mile from my house. I didn't call the reporter right away because I didn't have enough information.

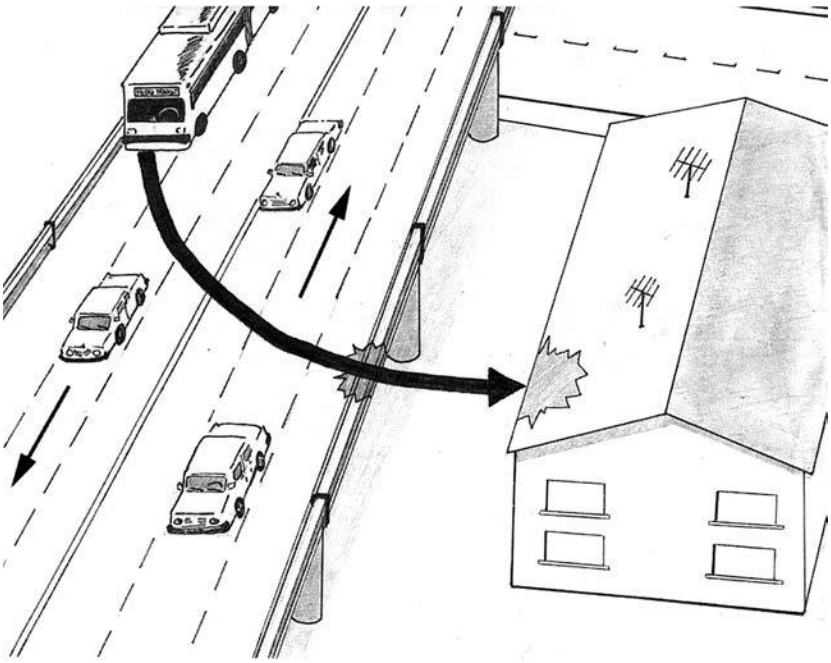


Figure 13.2 Sketch of route of bus headed over the bridge embankment. The 60-foot Metro Transit bus was traveling southbound toward downtown Seattle when a passenger in the front of the bus shot the driver. The bus then swerved into oncoming traffic on Aurora Bridge, crashed

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through a guardrail, and plunged about 45 feet, striking the roof of an apartment building before coming to rest on the front lawn of that building. The driver, the assailant, and another passenger died of injuries. Drawing by Gina Arnold. Reprinted with permission.

Williams arrived at the scene about 30 minutes after the time of the accident. He described the scene as follows:

> The bus was resting upright in the front yard of a house. Emergency medical crews were removing victims from the bus and laying them on blankets and stretchers under the bridge; two or three of the most severely injured had already been taken to hospitals. The rest were being evaluated and treated at the scene. The bus driver was still receiving treatment on the roof of the house [where he had landed]. The Seattle Police Department had taped off the area, keeping media and onlookers about a block away. Detectives were beginning their investigation.

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Figure 13.3 The 40,000-pound Metro Transit bus broke into two after it fell from Aurora Bridge in Seattle. Three people died and 29 passengers were injured, some seriously. Fortunately, no one on the ground was injured. Reprinted with permission from the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*.

Williams learned that an assailant had shot the bus driver, sending the southbound 60-foot-long (so long it bends in the middle), 40,000-pound bus across oncoming northbound traffic, traffic that would have been heavier at that time of the afternoon had it not been for the holiday. The bus crashed through two sections of iron and concrete guardrails and shot through the air, temporarily landing on top of a two-story apartment building near the bridge, where the driver was ejected. But then the bus bounced off the roof and broke in two: The front part of the bus landed on the steps of the apartment building, and the back part landed upright on a front lawn.

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The driver, 44-year-old Mark McLaughlin, died of his injuries. The assailant apparently died of a self-inflicted bullet wound, but his identity was not known until the next day. The 33 passengers had various injuries; one later died of his injuries. Miraculously, no non-passenger was injured. The Friday following Thanksgiving is normally a "slow news day." Very few events, press conferences, or speeches are scheduled because many people take the day off as part of a 4-day Thanksgiving weekend. Newscasts usually consist of soft news and features; it's a good day for public relations professionals to get their video news releases aired. But this was not a typical holiday weekend. Soft news, features, and video news releases were bumped by this breaking news event. Because the combination of a shooting, an accident, a bus off a bridge, and relatively low loss of life was so unusual, the story was carried by news outlets all over the United States. The accident occurred at 3:15 p.m., and shortly thereafter local television news operations began covering the accident with live breaking news reports. Some stations preempted regular broadcasting and were on the air continuously through their evening newscasts. After the network news programs (some of which also ran the story), the local stations returned to air more live coverage from the scene.

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