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Making Intraorganizational Communication Public Knowledge: A Pedagogical Approach to Public Relations and Crisis Management

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Making Intraorganizational Communication Public Knowledge: A Pedagogical Approach to Public Relations and Crisis Management

Rationale: While there are many different areas about public relations on which instructors can focus (e.g., social media influencers, press kits, the development of relationships with investors), one common area/unit that has become hugely common within syllabi deals with crisis management. That is, not only how do organizations create the positively-valenced relationships with key stakeholders (as I remember learning about in my undergraduate years), but, post-crisis, how do key organizational agents re-create relationships that might have been [at least partially and at least momentarily] ruined? Based on a quick *Google* search just a moment ago (3:52pm on October 10, 2022), it is estimated that 4.131 billion people are currently online. This equates to nearly half of the world's population having access to, and being in, some online community. What are the implications? The implications are that organizational crises are more likely to happen. If an individual opens a packet of *Sweet N Low* at their local *Dunkin Donuts* and notices that there is something peculiar about the sweetener contained within, they can now post this and become the target for apology. *Dunkin Donuts* then needs to apologize. This will likely be followed by a formal apology on behalf of *Cumberland Packing Corp*: the product's manufacturer/distributor. And this is all based on strategic message design. If one looks at any crisis case (e.g., *Marriot's* data breach, *H&M's* recall of its 'Coolest Monkey in the Jungle' hoodie, the *Tide* pod challenge, the arrest of *Nissan's* Chief Executive Officer), one thing becomes overwhelmingly clear: the organization's intraorganizational communication among key system agents becomes public knowledge through effective crisis management. Given the increased likelihood of crises, as a result (at least in part) of our increased access to online, mediated vehicles and platforms, students need to learn and understand that organizations can just as easily become the source of image repair as compared to image creation.

Rules: The purpose of this pedagogical activity is for students to practice the role of public apoloia. In so doing, the class must be split up into different teams. One team becomes the crisis response team and one team becomes the public stakeholder group. The key is to determine the extent to which the right message was sent to the right stakeholder(s) and to which theory or theories of crisis communication said response can be linked. The project will take a total of approximately four weeks to complete. The crisis response team can locate the organizational crisis from any form of media, through I recommend one of two free, online sources: the case studies offered via the *Public Relations Society of America (PRSA)* and the case studies offered via *PRovoke Media*. I especially endorse *PRovoke Media*, who showcases its *Superior Achievement in Branding, Reputation, and Engagement (SABRE)* award-winners. Once the crisis response team has chosen the case about which it will present (which, ideally, should be approximately four weeks prior to the in-class discussion), it should provide it to the instructor just to make certain that it is a 'good' example of crisis communication and the need for crisis response/management. The team will then spend the next several weeks figuring out how it would respond given the parameters of the case in question. They should do as much research as possible so that they come to the in-class activity well-equipped to engage in dialogue and debate with the stakeholder group with whom they will be interacting (which, again, will be another team from class). For example, some key questions that they should ask themselves are the following:

What exactly created the organizational crisis in question?

How, based on informal research, did crisis managers attempt to respond to the crisis?

Was the crisis managed effectively?

How did key stakeholders respond to the crisis management strategies?

What specific message strategies were employed and why might these have been strategic?

Through what forms of media (e.g., social media platforms) did crisis management occur?

Exactly one week prior to the date on which the in-class activity will occur, the instructor should let the class members know which crises will be presented in class. Nothing more than this is necessary. It would be wonderful for students to engage in a priori research so that they are better prepared to become the stakeholder and be prepared to respond to the message design strategy adopted and presented by the crisis response team, but, as I have found in the past, this is not necessary for the success of the activity. I have found that most stakeholder groups will at least come to class with some knowledge of what transpired. And sometimes I have found that it is equally, if not more, effective if they have no knowledge at all. This, in fact, illustrates their understanding of the course material. While this activity works wonderfully well with classes ranging in number from 15-25, it can absolutely work for larger classes. That said, however, I fear that it might not be as conducive for a lecture-based class.

Summary: Like all courses in our discipline, students are looking to find the practical implications of crisis communication theory. There is perhaps no better way of so doing than to have students research crises to which the general public (including stakeholders of all sorts) has access and to then analyze them with a critical eye. Were they handled correctly? Could they have been handled differently? To what strategic message design strategies were the cases linked? To what crisis communication theories (e.g., Uncertainty Management Theory, Situational Crisis Communication Theory, Image Repair Theory, Chaos Theory) could the case in question be linked? The beauty of this activity is that it not only requires research on behalf of the students, but also lends itself to a rich exchange of ideas within the classroom that extends well beyond the specific activity. Response papers could be assigned. Discussion boards could permeate with additional insight about the four stages (research, planning, implementation, evaluation) of public relations. It can also be used as a platform for a final project, during which students fabricate their own crises and, again, pretend to be the response team necessary for providing much-needed information to consumers, investors, community members, employees, activists, and the like. Overall, this activity has received positive endorsement over the years and puts students in the driver's seat when it concerns a hugely important area of public relations research that is so crucial for student learning: crisis communication.

Additional References:

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