

Public relations in a crisis decision-making kaleidoscope

Mirandilla reports some initial findings on how organisational crisis decision-makers maximise the use of public relations in effective crisis management.

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ABSTRACT

Once gaining a seat in crisis decision-making teams, do public relations practitioners regard themselves as 'decision-makers'? This paper presents emerging themes from wider doctoral research in best practice in organisational crisis decision-making. This on-going study includes a synergy of perspectives among decision-makers in making sense of how decisions are developed during crises. Similar to kaleidoscopes revealing various patterns depending on which lens is used, this wider study reveals insights on crisis decision-making across three lenses in crisis teams, namely 1) members of senior management in organisations, 2) public relations (PR) practitioners, and 3) members of authorities. Myriad of views among these crisis sensemakers points to core elements in best practice in organisational crisis decision-making.

The purpose of this paper, however, is to magnify one aspect of this kaleidoscope. From a public relations lens, this paper discusses how public relations practitioners substantiate their membership in crisis teams. Emerging themes from conversations with them suggest that their engagement in decision-making is mainly as advisers during crisis decision-making processes. They are key players in implementing decision-making outcomes instead. There is more focused participation in formulation of actual crisis response tactics after decisions have been made by other members in crisis teams. With Karl Weick's (1995) notion on retrospective sensemaking as this study's central theoretical guidepost, making sense of the role of PR in crisis decision-making is significant to appreciating its potential in effective crisis management.

Note: This paper is based on an earlier article presented at the Australian and New Zealand Communication Association (ANZCA) Conference, Wellington, New Zealand, 9-11 July 2008.

PR in crisis decision-making: previous research in focus

Strategic and timely decision-making are crucial elements in crisis response. Crises are instances which are "specific, unexpected, and non-routine...that create high levels of uncertainty and threaten, or are perceived to threaten [an organisation's] high priority goals" (Ulmer, et al., 2007; p.7). These periods of "confusion or turbulence" (Bourke 2000, p. 203 cited in Gilpin & Murphy 2008, p. 13) propel organisations to shift from usual (i.e. everyday) to non-usual modes of thinking and acting.

From an organisational perspective, crises are situations which involve "jolt[s] that infuse organizations with energy, legitimize unorthodox acts, and destabilize power structures (Meyer 1982 in Krackhardt & Stern, 1998, p.125)." Weick (cited in Smith & Elliot, 2006) succinctly describes crises as "cosmology episodes" where the "rational, natural, and orderly fashion of how environments work are disrupted (p. 264). He further emphasises that crises create periods of uncertainty and ambiguity which lead to a momentary "collapse" or breakdown of how organisations "make sense" of what to do next (Weick, 1995). There is a "sense of contingency, of rapid change, [and] of limited predictability and control" (Gilpin & Murphy 2008, p. 6).

Amidst these complexities, decision-makers are expected to initiate choices and actions before circumstances brought by crises become worse. Conrad and Poole (2005) believe that decision-makers contend with certain limitations upon crisis onset. They say that in crises where there is a lack of available information and a deep sense of urgency to act, information retrieval and dissemination systems in organisations are challenged. Apart from this, the nature of human information processing itself and limited analytical skills of decision-makers (Conrad & Poole, 2005) may affect decision outcomes in crisis periods. In this current study, participants articulated how these challenges added to pressures inherent in crisis environments.

Inside crisis rooms, Heath and Coombs (2006) emphasise that choices in decision-making are considered through collaboration and dialogue with "interested parties" (p. 390) working together to seek agreements and compromises among themselves. Coombs (2007), however, cautions that some decisions

will not serve the interest of every party because some parties may be apprehensive and unwilling to contribute to decision-making depending on the nature of the interests they protect (Shapira, 1997).

Cyert and March (1963) coined this decision-making body as an organisation's dominant coalition which refers to an influential group of individuals who create organisational goals and shape organisational values and actions. Membership in this group set the room for negotiations on which interests are protected. Tracing the roots from the work of organisational theorists (Grunig, J.E. & Grunig, L.A., 1992), Berger (2005) observes that the "dominant coalition is a pivotal concept in mainstream public relations theory" (p. 5). According to him, if an organisation aims "to be socially responsible and to acquire and maintain social legitimacy", public relations practitioners should be included in this inner circle (Thompson, 1967).

Grunig and Hunt (cited in Broom & Dozier, 1986), in their previous research on models in public relations practice, argue that being a part of this inner circle allows public relations to influence management decision-making. In a managerial-technician continuum typology introduced by Dozier in his seminal research projects on PR roles, practitioners generally perform as communication technicians rather managers. The former suggests engagement in operationalising strategies formulated by decision-makers. Compared to a managerial-dominant role, communication technicians are "isolated from decision-making and accountability" (Broom & Dozier, 1986, p. 41).

Inclusion in dominant coalitions in organisations, it seems, should position the profession as managers than technicians. But, as this article asks, once gaining membership to this inner circle, are they strategists indeed? Or does their engagement in crisis decision-making continue to validate Dozier's earlier findings?

Making sense in the kaleidoscope

Making sense of roles in this kaleidoscope follows how the wider study on best practice in organisational crisis decision-making makes sense of crucial elements in effective decision-making during crises. Karl Weick's (1995) notion on retrospective sensemaking is a central theoretical guidepost in the study. Weick proposes that sensemaking is about how social actors frame situations and attempt to construct meaning from them. It is about ways how people generate what they interpret (Weick 1995). During crises, this may mean decision-makers make sense of crises based on roles they represent in crisis teams. This may also mean how decision makers act, or develop choices on how organisations should act, when a crisis happens. It "involves turning circumstances into a situation that is comprehended explicitly in words and that serves as a springboard into action (Weick & Sutcliffe, 2005, p. 409)."

The current study shares the view that in responding to "surprising or confusing" circumstances (Maitlis, 2005, p. 21; for more, read Gioia & Thomas, 1996; Weick,

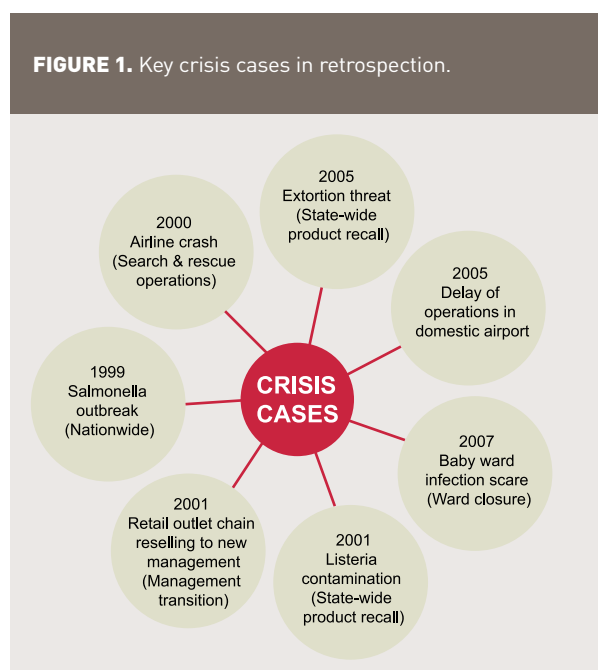
1993, 1995), sensemaking aims to reduce equivocality (Weick, 1995) among decision-makers. Reducing equivocality means that in these circumstances, it is first imperative for decision-makers to gain a collective understanding about the incident. Translating this understanding into choices, decisions, and actions in crisis response comes next. When events present operational, fiscal, and reputational threats (Howell & Miller, 2006), organisations operate in an environment of increased pressure. Making sense becomes even more demanding. Decision-makers then take the position of socially constructing (Berger & Luckmann, 1993 cited in Maitlis, 2005) among themselves ways to create order amidst the chaos (Weick, 1993, 1995). Effective responses to changes rapidly taking place during crisis onset need to arise from this sensemaking process.

Out of seven properties characterising Weick's concept of sensemaking, this study focuses on the retrospective aspect in framing meanings. Taylor and Van Emery (2000 cited in Weick, et al 2005, p. 275) succinctly argue that "sensemaking involves the ongoing retrospective development of plausible images that rationalize what people are doing. According to them, sensemaking is an important process in organising which occurs when social actors construct meanings about events guiding their future decisions and actions. Constructing meanings is based on cues extracted from events. Framing these cues, in Weick's opinion, puts emphasis on significance of previous experiences as inputs to current sensemaking. A retrospective angle in making sense introduces an ongoing, non-linear and non-sequential cyclical path in meaning generation. "Sense", in crises, may emerge from various types of information processed by decision-makers in different stages of how crises unfold.

Drawing from a qualitative approach (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000), meaning-making is based on retrospective accounts of public relations practitioners gathered by conducting a series of in-depth semi-structured interviews. As one lens of the kaleidoscope, practitioners are joined by senior management and police authorities in the wider research project. Purposive and snowball sampling methods were used in selecting participants of the study. Purposive sampling follows several criteria in choosing which practitioners to interview. Participating in crisis situations as crisis communication consultants of organisations in Australia was the main criteria in selecting practitioners. The researcher then requested for referrals from first batch of interviewees in identifying subsequent ones. Through these sampling methods, the PR practitioner decision-making group in this study is composed of a mix of in-house and external consultants who helped several Australian organisations manage the crises in the past. They provide first-hand insights not only on decision-making activities in organisations during crises, but also personal views on their role as members of this decision-making nexus themselves. Drawing from a qualitative approach (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000), data was analysed through stages of coding interview transcripts to form cluster of themes, some of which are explored

in this paper. Verbatim responses quoted from interview sessions are placed in quotes throughout this text.

Figure 1 below illustrates several crisis cases mostly referred to by practitioners during interviews. Identifying these cases provide context as regards the type of crises referred to by participants in this research. Albeit serving as key reference points, perspectives shared were not confined within these cases alone. In this study, sensemaking of past experiences transpired as an amalgamation of both direct and indirect experiences in crisis management. Refer to Appendix A for brief background information on these cases.



One of the early findings of the study suggests that in-house practitioners and external consultants differ in their level of involvement in crisis decision-making. Role distinctions between a consultant and an in-house practitioner may influence how practitioners engage as members of decision-making teams. Views shared by the participants suggest that participation in decision-making processes may be set differently if one joins as in-house or external consultant. Succeeding sections in this paper further expounds on this theme.

Emerging patterns in the kaleidoscope: early findings

Once members of crisis decision-making teams, public relations practitioners included in this study perceive their role to be more advisory than strategic. Both in-house and external consultants acknowledge a hierarchy of positions present in crisis teams. They recognise that other members in crisis teams hold "higher" seats in a "decision-making ladder" than others. To the practitioners, top seat holders in this ladder are those who possess negotiating power during deliberations. More importantly, they are the ones who make final decisions on strategy formulation

and execution. Among those interviewed working as in-house practitioners in government organisations, senior ministers or high ranking government officials are the ones occupying top seats in this ladder. Similarly, according to consultants, this position is occupied by clients who hire them in crisis periods.

Practitioners reveal that their engagement in crisis decision-making teams is more focused on operationalising strategies after decisions are made. Both in-house and external consultants share that there is more reliance on their role in implementing tactical activities based on umbrella crisis response strategies identified by crisis teams. For instance, below are several standard PR tasks assigned to practitioners upon joining crisis teams. Tactical orientation of these tasks can be noted.

- Organising media conferences
- Formulation of key messages and communication strategies
- Formal or informal research
- Website activity
- Setting up media centres, hotlines
- Information-dissemination across stakeholder bases
- Briefs to official spokespersons

Despite sharing a common view on playing advisory and tactical-oriented roles in crisis teams, in-house practitioners and consultants attribute this to varying reasons. On the one hand, in-house practitioners explain that organisational culture inherent in their work places imposes limitations on their level of strategic involvement during crises.

Working in government organisations, for instance, entails protocols to be followed. A current communications manager in a state police department mentions that she has yet to experience direct involvement in upper decision-making ladders as compared to her immediate supervisor. Often, the latter cascades down to her decisions made inside crisis rooms. She attributes this to a "heavy chain-of-command" strictly adhered to in her workplace. According to her, organizational hierarchy recognised in state police offices "dictate" who should be included in decision-making meetings. As her supervisor holds a higher rank, she represents both of them in meetings. This, however, limits the practitioner's latitudes for negotiation as a "manager" herself. She believes that "expertise" she brings into the team as a communication manager "should be there in the meeting itself."

Another communications manager in a public hospital adds that despite her capacity to formulate strategies in communicating crisis situations in her work place, she is often constrained by what she perceives to be her minister's preferences. In terms of recommending proactive strategies in communicating crises, she said, "at some point, everyone seems to be looking after themselves so that they get covered the minute the Minister starts inquiring about what is going on." She emphasises that apart from considering organisational hierarchies, working as in-house

practitioners in government offices entails conscious consideration of personalities of public figures connected to their office. There is high bureaucratic inertia that one at times contends with in terms of what should be said versus what these personalities want to be said. Similar to her colleague working in a state police department, her role is constrained by “how things are” in her work environment.

On the other hand, consultants concede the inherent nature of being “external” to organisations readily imposes limitations on how well they can “penetrate into decision-making ladders”, according to some of the participants. To them, operating in a client-consultancy relationship reminds them to act as “nothing more but consultants.” According to one of them who helped manage a state-wide product recall in 2005, being a consultant allows him to be “emotionally detached” from his client and the company’s priorities. He meant that he can only suggest alternatives to his clients, but the hard choices whether to take these advice on board are left for them to decide. To him, “it’s as if [one] can literally walk out of the crisis room the next day and not be affected.” His co-consultant who worked with him in the same crisis case added that “it’s about how far in a decision-making tree one reaches as a consultant”.

On a similar note, a consultant hired by a private hospital said that because she was coming in as an external consultant to a hospital crisis, it made it easier for the crisis team to simply inform her of their decision outputs “by default”. The hospital management decided to close its maternity ward when several cases of infection among babies occurred. She was hired by the crisis team only 24 hours later. She shared the perception that as an adviser, her membership in the crisis team was more inclined towards technical concerns about means of information dissemination (e.g. websites, content of media releases, etc.). She further views her contribution as a communication technician focusing on delivering tactics decided by her client in communicating to the hospital’s stakeholder base.

Other consultants feel that crisis types may influence how crisis teams value their participation in crisis decision-making. According to them, there is “extreme reliance” on public relations when crisis cases involve death or injuries. These cases result in heavy scrutiny from the media and other sectors in a community. One consultant explains that in a contamination crisis which he managed in 2001, he found his client reliant on his advice when the media started “throwing heavy questions” about death incidents allegedly linking consumption of their products supplied to an aged care facility. In this instance, he was provided with more room for involvement in key strategic formulation. He said that he “felt like almost a decision-maker and not just an adviser” back then, and that his client may have regarded his role differently if there were no deaths involved.

Lastly, findings of the study suggest that advisory and tactical roles played by consultants depend on how “crisis ready” their clients believe they are upon crisis onset. Consultants reveal that clients who chose not to consider their vulnerabilities to crises prior to their

occurrence were the ones who relied more on them in setting up crisis response mechanisms when crises happened. This was especially observed during initial hours after crisis trigger. A “crisis cannot happen to us” attitude among these clients results in failure to develop clearly articulated crisis preparedness scenarios. Practitioners describe that their roles become more strategic-oriented than advisory when lack of crisis management plans is coupled with crisis types presenting “overwhelming implications” to their clients. They felt that these circumstances elevate their roles in decision-making ladders from mere advisers to “almost the decision-makers.”

On the contrary, when organisational management has a clearer grasp of priorities and resources available in crises, consultants are expected to participate more in implementing outputs in decision-making thereby situating them at bottom positions in decision-making ladders.

Mirroring PR in crisis decision-making: A [tentative] conclusion

This work in progress points to tentative conclusions. Making sense in a crisis decision-making kaleidoscope from a public relations lens suggests the necessity that other lenses in crisis teams recognise the value of PR’s contribution in managing crises. However, practitioners perceive their contribution as more confined to managing outcomes of decisions instead of managing processes involved in decision-making. In other words, public relations practitioners are key players in crisis management, but are advisers in crisis decision-making. The former puts more emphasis on PR’s presence in an operational and/or tactical sense, whereas the latter describes how PR practice has yet to fully embody a front-liner decision-making seat in crisis teams. As Broom and Dozier (1986) suggest, “they are senior ranking advisors to decision-makers, but are not themselves decision-makers (p.41).” If, according to participants in this paper, “strategic” means allowing more opportunities for negotiations prior to finalising choices in crisis response, PR’s role has yet to continue working on gaining a stronger hold in strategic formulation.

Revisiting a managerial-technician continuum (Broom & Dozier, 1986) mentioned earlier in this paper, findings of this study affirm that even in crises, PR’s involvement is more inclined towards being technicians than managers. Public relations scholars aim for the profession to be regarded as a managerial function rather than being confined to technical tasks producing deliverables (Berger, 2005, p. 13). Text deliverables consist of actual materials such as speeches, newsletters, announcements, position statements: outputs of decision making. In order for public relations practice to grow as a profession, previous studies emphasise membership to dominant coalitions in organisations.

Nonetheless, findings of this study show that membership in dominant coalitions does not directly entail strategic decision-making opportunities among

practitioners. Setting aside what is ideal, the majority of assigned activities in crisis teams remain to be inclined either towards technical aspects with emphasis on producing text deliverables or staging tactical crisis response activities.

This paper has attempted to engage in discussion of some of emerging themes in the findings of the wider study being undertaken by this researcher. The latter is poised to continue making sense of this kaleidoscope both from a practical and theoretical sense in order to widen room for further discussion and debate on how organisations and communities may maximise the full potential of public relations in effective crisis management.

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About the author

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Appendix A. Crisis cases in retrospect

1999 salmonella outbreak

On March 8, 1999, an Australian company manufacturing and distributing fruit juices to the country issued a voluntary nationwide product recall when the state health institutions informed its management of a potential link of contamination of their products causing illness among several hundreds of customers. The outbreak was later on revealed to be caused by salmonella bacteria found in fruits supplied to the company. Amidst intricacies involved in instigating a nationwide recall, products were back to shelves a month after issuing such.

2000 airline crash

On May 31, 2000, a domestic flight from a state capital en route to its destination to a nearby region crashed into the waters at 7:01 in the evening, killing all eight passengers onboard including its pilot. Investigative reports indicated that technical aircraft failure caused the crash. A massive search and rescue operation was conducted with the State Police office coordinating the activities. Upon crisis onset, airline management refused to take part in managing the crisis.

2001 retail outlet chain re-selling

On April 2001, a major retail outlet chain was suspended from trading its stock by the Australian Stock Exchange due to accounting irregularities amounting to nearly \$125 million. The company's board of directors appointed an accounting firm to investigate on the issue which smouldered into crisis point when the company was eventually sold to a new management in November 2001 causing anxieties among members of its stakeholder base.

2001 listeria contamination

On December 12, 2005, a family-owned smallgoods company issued a state-wide voluntary product recall when it received a phone call from the health authorities informing them that deaths of two patients and illness among others in a specific community were linked to consumption of its products. The latter were found to be contaminated with listeria, a type of bacterium which attacks meat products. In this particular case, sliced cold beef served in hospitals was the carrier of the contamination. It was crucial for the crisis team to manage the situation successfully as the timing of the crisis threatened the company's Christmas sales, one of its peak seasons. After eight weeks upon recall announcement, products were back into shelves in January 2006.

2005 delay of operations in domestic airport

After a widely publicised opening ceremony by a domestic airport in Australia in October 2005, the airport organisation announced that commencement of domestic flight services in the new terminal would be delayed due to contamination in the fuelling system of the terminal. Airport organisation faced intense public scrutiny when it failed to set a specific date on when operations will resume. This was after a series of cancellation of promised dates in opening the facility. The fact that this delay occurred a year preceding state elections posed additional layers of political pressures to contend with thus exacerbating the situation for the organisation.

2005 extortion threat

On July 1, 2005, a multi-national Australian confectionary company issued a state-wide recall upon receiving a third of a series of extortion letters sent by an unknown sender to the manufacturing office of the company based in another state. In the letters, the extortionist made unspecified demands on a third party which, when unmet, threatened to poison several bars of chocolates released in the market. The company did not ignore the level of threat posed by the extortionist in spite of considering itself as an innocent victim of the demands made on another organisation. There were no reported cases of contamination among consumers before and after recall announcement. Products were back into the shelves seven weeks after they were recalled from the market.

2007 maternity ward infection care

In May 2007, a leading private hospital issued announcements on a temporary closure of its maternity ward after its management has traced infection cases among 20 outpatient babies delivered in its facility. The hospital was alerted on the crisis when rashes were seen among 20 outpatients, mostly babies, who were confined in the hospital since March of the same year. Hospital management decided to close the ward for investigation and sanitation purposes. Less than a week after its closure, the ward resumed its operations.