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GREAT IDEA FOR TEACHING

Salmonella in the Student Union! Applying the Best Practices in Crisis Communication in a Mock Crisis Activity

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Abstract
Crisis communication is utilized in many situations and by many organizations. Due to the nature of crises as well as their ability to produce high uncertainty and to threaten goals and well-being, there are communicative exigencies that need to be addressed relating to health effects and risks, which can vary depending on the crisis, publics, and the organization(s) that is(are) responding. This lesson plan uses Seeger's (2006) "Best Practices in Crisis Communication" to illustrate how different organizations utilize and implement crisis communication during the onset of a crisis. Instructors are provided with an overview of the materials and procedures which are needed for a 90-minute classroom activity, including citations for readings and a lecture, descriptive handouts for the students, and a procedure for debriefing and discussing the activity's outcomes.

Courses
Crisis Communication, Health Communication, Organizational Communication, and Risk Communication

Objectives
- To have students demonstrate their understanding of crisis communication and its best practices via the students' ability to analyze a mock crisis; to apply the best practices; and to craft a response that addresses the exigencies of the mock crisis and functions within the students' assigned organizational role, image, and priority goals.
- To increase students' understanding and critical-thinking skills in an applied context, challenging the students to consider how class concepts relate to societal concerns and events, such as crises.

Introduction and Rationale

Crises are characterized by their unpredictable nature, disruption of routine, and production of high uncertainty; mandate swift action; threaten goals; and cause varying degrees of damage (Seeger, Sellnow, & Ulmer, 2003; Sellnow & Seeger, 2013). These characteristics of crises often require explicit communication about the health effects and risks due to the crises' chaotic and destructive nature. Crises can be specific to organizations, sub-organizations, communities, or states, or crises can be set on a global level. Depending on the organizations' role in a crisis, their goals, and affected publics, their crisis responses can require different

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communicative elements, message design, and context-dependent information. Crises, therefore, are opportune contexts for communication-centered classroom activities.

Crisis communication is an ongoing process that aims to create shared meaning with and among the affected individuals, groups, communities, and (responding) agencies within the crisis' context. Crisis communication's purpose is to prepare and to inform groups, communities, individuals, and agencies, aiming to limit harm and to facilitate preparedness, response, and recovery (Sellnow & Seeger, 2013). In an effort to explicate the communicative elements needed for effective crisis communication, Seeger (2006) outlined the 10 best practices, which are organizational in nature, for crisis communication:

1. Incorporate process approaches and policy development that are inclusive to communication strategies for decision making.
2. Plan during the pre-event stage to identify potential hazards.
3. Facilitate partnerships with the public, and utilize a dialogic approach to work *with* the public as a legitimate partner.
4. Listen to the public's concerns, and understand the target audience(s). Their concerns should be considered and responded to, which is typically more successful when positive relationships are established before a crisis.
5. Communicate with honesty, candor, and openness. These three communicative qualities should be apparent in a crisis communicator's public communication.
6. Collaborate and coordinate with credible sources that help organizations and officials manage their messages and corresponding activities. Ideally, collaboration and coordination with credible sources are established before a crisis.
7. Meet the media' needs, and remain accessible because the media are primary information sources for the public. Messages should be consistent, accept uncertainty, and avoid over-reassuring the public.
8. Express compassion, concern, and empathy in all crisis communication. This kind of communication can help bolster the message's credibility and enhance the communicator's perceived legitimacy.
9. Accept uncertainty and ambiguity; do not offer over-reassuring messages. Be open in acknowledging uncertainty, but do not use it to avoid communicating about undesirable information.
10. Incorporate messages of self-efficacy. These messages provide the public with specific information and protective actions that can reduce exposure to harm/risks.

Such information can provide people with some sense of control during a crisis.

Classroom activities that highlight the essential elements of crisis communication, as outlined by Seeger (2006), help students to gain insight about analyzing a crisis, along with the communicative elements needed for effective crisis communication, and highlight the relevance of these topics within larger societal concerns and events, teamwork, critical analysis, and the dynamic and interdisciplinary nature of crisis communication (Sellnow & Seeger, 2013).

Using a mock crisis event (Appendix A), set at a university, is a novel and enticing way to critically engage students in examining, responding to, and applying classroom concepts. The activity described in this article challenges students to move beyond concept memorization. Students take the role of one of three university sub-organizations which are responding to a foodborne illness in their university's student union. Within the groups, the students engage with peers in order to craft a response according to their assigned organization. Students also respond to questions posed by peers in other groups. Responding to questions posed by peers in other groups requires students to provide time-sensitive, synchronous responses which demonstrate the need for rapid, yet concise and accurate, information during crises (e.g., Sellnow & Seeger, 2013). The primary objectives for this classroom activity are to have students analyze a mock crisis, to apply the best practices in crisis communication (Seeger, 2006), and to craft a response that is effective based on the best practices as well as aligned with the assigned organization's role, image, and priority goals (Appendix B). Additionally, the applied nature of this activity challenges students to consider how class concepts relate to societal concerns and events, such as crises.

Description of the Activity

This activity requires three groups. Each group has its own organizational role, image, and priority goals (Appendix B). Students are instructed to keep this information in mind throughout the activity. Before beginning the activity, the instructor should briefly lecture and review the best practices (Seeger, 2006) before moving on to introduce the mock crisis. Then, each group is asked to craft a response from its assigned organizational perspective. After approximately 25 to 30 minutes preparing a response, each group provides the class with a brief overview of its assigned organization and presents the group's crisis response. Once all three groups have presented, a question-and-answer session begins. Students get the opportunity to ask peers in the other groups questions. The question-and-answer session is followed by a classroom-wide debriefing and discussion.

Lecture Materials

Prior to the activity, students should read articles about crises, the best practices in crisis communication, and example applications of the best practices (Seeger, 2006; Seeger et al., 2003; Ulmer, Sellnow, & Seeger, 2015). On the day of the activity, the class should briefly review (e.g., approximately 20 minutes) the 10 best practices and a couple specific examples of instances where the best practices have been applied (or would have benefited from application), such as the 1996 Odwalla apple juice crisis or the 2008 King Car melamine crisis (Ulmer et al., 2015). Then, the instructor should provide each student with a printed handout describing the mock crisis and briefly review the handout with the class (Appendix A).

Organizational Roles

When students arrive for class on the day of the activity, they are assigned a number: one, two, or three. Once all students arrive and have an assigned number, they are asked to gather in their assigned groups. Each group should receive printed handouts that explain its assigned organization's role, image, and priority goals (Appendix B). These three elements are important for the groups to remember when developing their crisis responses.

Group Responses

After reviewing their assigned organization's details together, the groups are given approximately 25 to 30 minutes to craft a response message that is particular to their assigned organization. In their crisis-response message, groups are asked to adhere to the best practices for crisis communication (Seeger, 2006), paying close attention to crisis elements that may warrant further action on behalf of the students' assigned organization as related to health effects and identifiable risks. This portion of the activity helps demonstrate the intricacies of crises. For example, students should think about, What is your organization's plan for remedying this crisis? What kind of health information/services will your organization offer to affected individuals? Is the crisis a responsibility of your organization? Why or why not? How will you tell the public(s) about your organization's decision (e.g., press release, social media)? Such questions help to engage students' critical-thinking because they must manage public-health risks associated with the crisis while also keeping their organization's role, image, and priority goals in mind.

After the groups compose a crisis response, they present the responses to the class. During the presentations, other groups are asked to write questions for the presenting group. Once all groups have presented their crisis responses, each group has the opportunity to ask one or two questions of the other groups. Students are given five minutes with their group to discuss what question(s) they will ask. A brief question-and-answer session follows, and the groups should choose a spokesperson to respond to the questions. The posed questions are answered in an impromptu fashion as seen at press conferences.

Procedure

1. Prior to class, have students read about crises (e.g., Sellnow & Seeger, 2013) and the best practices for crisis communication (Seeger, 2006).
2. As students arrive for class, assign them a number for the groups: one, two, or three. (The number of groups can vary depending on class size.)
3. Before beginning the activity, review the 10 best practices for crisis communication as well as one to two application examples.
4. Explain the mock crisis to students. Provide a printed handout for each student with the description of the mock crisis (Appendix A).
5. Have students assemble in their assigned groups, and provide handouts that explain each group's organizational role, image, and priority goals (Appendix B). There should be enough handouts for each student to have his/her/their own copy. Allocate a few minutes for students to review the handouts and to have a discussion with the group.
6. Provide students with approximately 25 to 30 minutes to craft a crisis response on behalf of their organization.
7. Have each group present its organizational role, image, and priority goals, followed by its crisis-response message. During each presentation, have the students in the audience write questions for the presenting group.
8. After all groups have presented, give the students a few minutes to discuss the other groups' crisis responses. During this time, have each group select one or two questions for the other groups. Each group should be able to ask at least one question. This portion of the activity is meant to facilitate dialogue among the groups and to practice rapid-response communication, which is typical during press conferences surrounding crises.
9. Once all groups have asked their question(s), move on to debriefing.

Debriefing

During the debriefing, students are asked to think about the mock crisis, crisis communication and its best practices, how the best practices were applied in this activity, and how the best practices helped the group respond to the crisis in an effective manner that aligned with the assigned organization. (e.g., Allocate about 10 to 15 minutes.) Debriefing should involve a discussion about what elements were vital to the crisis response, what could have been improved and why, how crises intersect with health and risk(s), and the importance of context during crises. Students are also invited to share the struggles they faced while crafting the response. It is vital that all students are engaged.

It is important to use an established technique in order to assure and to measure each student's engagement in the debriefing. Useful techniques could include asking all students to give a "thumbs up" or "thumbs down" after posing questions (i.e., "Did the 10 'best practices in crisis communication' help your group craft an appropriate response? Why/not?") to gauge the activity's success. Students who give a "thumbs up" and "thumbs down" should be asked to explain their reasoning, prompting further discussion. Once this segment of the debriefing has concluded, students should reflect on the activity as part of the appraisal.

Appraisal

This activity can provide students with a deeper understanding of crisis communication and the communicative elements which are needed for crisis-response messages. The activity not only facilitates a more substantive dialogue for future classroom activities and discussions, but it also *demonstrates* the applied nature of crisis communication from different organizational perspectives. This part of the activity is a benefit for future classroom discussion and assignments because students can use Seeger's (2006) "Best Practices in Crisis Communication" as a guide for future analyses. Lastly, there are numerous teaching modalities, such as lecture, discussion, group work, and interactive question-and-answer, which this activity utilizes. Using several teaching modalities can help engage students who have various learning styles and preferences.

After completing the activity and debriefing, students are prompted to individually reflect on the activity. Specifically, students are asked to identify two elements of the activity which they liked, two elements that could be improved (and how), and what they "took away" from the activity. Students can provide feedback anonymously (if desired) but are asked to keep their comments constructive in nature. Their feedback can then be used as a guide to structure the following classes, such as reviewing any concepts that were unclear or misunderstood.

Variations

There are numerous variations that could be used for this activity. Depending on class size, course level (i.e., introductory or advanced), and the available resources, instructors could use a different mock crisis and/or implement interactive media.

Different Crises

The activity could implement a different mock crisis as long as the context remains relevant to the outlined objectives. Different mock crises could include a human-caused crisis, such as a large oil spill, or a natural disaster which cause massive power outages and water contamination.

Interactive Media

Interactive media—largely social media—are regularly utilized tools for crisis communication (Vos & Buckner, 2016). This activity could be supplemented by having students create social-media posts as part of the crisis response. To keep the posts in-house, the instructor can set up a private group or page for students to utilize and/or have students craft the posts under a generic social-media account that each group creates for the activity. A learning objective for this variation, for example, would be crafting an effective crisis response with restricted character limits (e.g., Twitter).

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Appendix A
The Mock Crisis

Urgent! Many students have reported severe illnesses after eating at the student union. Symptoms have included diarrhea, nausea, fever, stomach cramps, cold/hot flashes, and weakness. Eleven students have been told by local physicians that they contracted Salmonella.

Setting: The university's student-union restaurants. There are 15 restaurants in the union. Of the 350+ affected students, all 15 restaurants have been reported as places of food consumption.

Timeline: The first report was filed by an affected student on Wednesday evening. The report was given to a student-union restaurant manager who passed the report to university officials. Other reports followed on Thursday and Friday. So far, there has been no response from the university, and the source of the food contaminate(s) is still unknown.

Affected population: 350+ enrolled university students (Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday).

Where reports were filed:

- Student administration: over 60 phone calls.
- University's Facebook page: 200 posts (most negative in nature).
- University's Twitter handle: 145 Tweets (most negative in nature).
- Office of the university president: 35 phone calls and 30 emails.
- Eleven students have checked into the University Hospital's Emergency Department. All 11 students were told they have Salmonella.
- An angry parent of a hospitalized student was interviewed by Local9 Television News. Local9 News is now "investigating" the issue.

Appendix B
Organizational Descriptions

Group #1: University's Student Representation Association

Role: Advocate for all enrolled university students.

Organizational image: Student-run, open-access organization.

Organizational priority goals:
1. Serve the student population's interests.
2. Advocate for the students' rights, access, opportunity, and future.
3. Serve as a primary information resource for the student population.
4. Take the necessary actions to uphold the association's priority goals.

Group #2: University Administration

Role: Responsible for all activity associated with the university and all activity that occurs on campus.

Organizational image: A public, non-profit, "doctoral university: highest research activity" (by the Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education) educational institution.

Organizational priority goals:
1. Ensure the university's safety, functioning, and operations.
2. Ensure that the university's mission statement and goals are upheld and represented accordingly. The university's mission statement is as follows:
   To help our students reach personal educational goals by providing high-quality learning experiences which are centered on individual attention to each student's academic development, growth, and success.
3. Ensure that the university's priority values are upheld:
   Communication, collaboration, excellence, innovation, integrity, and service.

Group #3: The University's Food Supplier

Role: Supply and transport all food served at the university's student union.

Organizational image: A local franchise business that holds a long-standing contract with the university. The university is the company's largest account.

Organizational priority goals:
1. Provide customers with quality, fresh, and nutritious food products.
2. Prioritize customers and their food-related needs.
3. Provide customers with timely and accurate communication regarding the company's products as well as customers' needs and suggestions.
4. Maintain the necessary safety standards and sanitary operations.