

## CRISIS COMMUNICATION – BETWEEN INABILITY AND MASTERY

Ștefania BEJAN<sup>1</sup>

1. Postdoctoral Researcher, Romanian Academy, Iași Branch, Romania  
Corresponding author: stbejan@yahoo.fr

### Abstract

Despite all the warnings and social experiences of postmodernity, we are dealing with a crisis of communication, the reasons varying from ignorance to the distrust in the virtues and “recipes” associated to the field. The hope in miraculous solutions from the public relations “prophets” does not soothe the dialogue deficit of the moment, whether talking about organisations, public figures, nations or ordinary people.

The cases present in the specialty literature accredit the idea of an optimistic approach of any crisis of communication, not only bearer of professional challenge beneficial to the personal development of the “public relations specialist” or to the history of the suffering institution, but also tenderer of an un hoped opportunity: public visibility or extra confidence and, why not, the possibility of winning strategy export.

The fact that too few crises of communication convert to (professional) social success denotes the inability of the actors employed in such roles to put in work the emergency therapeutic arsenal. Mastery requires something more...

There are many authors interested in defining the crisis, in order not to satisfy a slightly malicious conclusion, although fully justified, belonging to J. J. Burnett, who says that “current level of understanding of this term is very simplistic and incomplete.” Moreover, J. A. Robinson believes that, despite its continuous usage, the term does not yet have scientific significance. With the meaning of judgment, decision, discrimination (according to the historians of ancient Greece), critical analysis (including evaluation and leadership) at Stagirite, it became in the last decades synonymous with the (economic) growth interruption, biologic development phases, watershed moments that shatter all anticipation and human personality; according to political scientists, system, governmental and international crisis combine “strong threats that can influence the major purposes of the political leaders,” a short period of time before the unwanted development of

events and the effect of surprise<sup>1</sup>; current Romanian sociologists place in dictionaries the meaning of time marked by the accumulation of difficulties, the burst of tensions under the form of conflicts, where the obvious pressures for change appear<sup>2</sup>; following the footsteps of Madeleine Grawitz, for whom the crisis is “a situation of intense conflict, in which one doubts the values, the relationship between generations or social groups”, the theoreticians and practitioners of public relations speak about phenomena that break the smooth functioning of the organization, moments of blockage or poor management of information exchanges, that, in the end, lead to material loss, social prestige and therefore alter the public image.

Regardless of the threats of the crisis, a magic formula brings back the world order since the crisis appears as “window to opportunity” – Gerald Meyers. The author lists no less than seven kinds of opportunities which an organization in crisis has at its disposal: the birth of heroes, the speeding up of change, the highlighting of latent difficulties, the change of people (physical changes, the use of some innovative ideas, behavioral change), the development of new strategies, the use of prevention systems for other possible crises, the increase of company competitiveness.

Robert Ulmer and his collaborators consider the accomplishment of efficient organizational learning in the context of the following opportunities offered by crisis situations: dealing with failure as an opportunity to recognize the upcoming crisis and its therapy; avoiding future crisis, by learning some important lessons from the former problems considered as crisis; organizational memory becomes a priority by involving the internal public and the careful planning of gestures belonging to internal

communication; opening the organizations towards new ways of dealing with crisis.

Involving organizations, audiences, communication specialists (PR and journalists), the crisis sends us to problem management, together with what we call crisis communication. In order to be able to solve a matter that tends to extend, causing damage in terms of public image (reputation, prestige, market share), the claimed crisis management must be perceived as a research activity aiming to discover and monitor trends and events that may negatively affect the organization and its public. The stages of crisis management are presented by James Lukaszewski as following:

- 1) State the moral authority expected by an ethical management team (insist upon forgiving if there is sincerity and openness, explanations and disclosures, commitment to communicate, empathy, answers to interrogations caused by the crisis phenomenon, apologies, supervision, firm promises that the present error will not be repeated, compensation and penance)
- 2) Take responsibility in taking care of the victims (otherwise the chances of regaining the trust of others diminish considerably);
- 3) Establish the right tone for the reaction of the organisation (this would mean fulfilling the expectations triggered by the crisis, of behalf of the management team, in the sense of a dynamic attitude inflicted on the employees, in order to avoid slow actions, following the example of a defensive leader...);
- 4) Clearly state who will be the voice of the organization (it is recommended that, during crisis, the target group for unwanted consequences to gain face and voice, to suggest fast solutions, not to humiliate and to be able to avoid criticism and critics );
- 5) Lead at every level (be true leaders, the ones who are responsible with the healing of the crisis must always be present, to focus everybody on the common purpose, to state the intention of preventing the appearance of similar situations - this will help the victims to get over the shock more easily, knowing that "all crisis are first of all management problems" and that "90% of the superior management's activities should be transparent

to other people, and they should show that they are true leaders and empathy motivators")<sup>3</sup>.

The above mentioned authors use the tools offered by "Getpress.com" when it comes to crisis communication: declaration, exchange of questions and answers with the media, communicating with employees and regulators, (mental) building of telephone scripts for customer service in the form of interrogations and anticipated "replicas." On the site of the same strategist are posted some "basic guidelines" for crisis communication that, in compliance, would certainly give off some very good results in this particular matter. Starting from "Communicate!" ("no comment" is forbidden; the press likes only the ones who want to help), continuing with "Don't lie!" (and don't speculate; use only confirmed information), "Help the victims and their families," "Do not rely only on press conferences!" (communicate within the time limit set by the journalists), "Don't use a defensive attitude!" (be prepared for aggressive questions), "Don't talk nonsense!" (simple answers help the press), "Be patient with the reporters in the difficult matters!" "Monitor the media appearances and correct the mistakes!," "Carefully prepare the essential stuff!" "Don't talk about legal matters with journalists!," "Offer a continuous flow of information to the media!," "Pay attention to the important role of social means of communication!," all these elements guide and support those interested to keep the organization represented in the desired manner, creating sympathy, transparency and trust.

Because examples and recommendations of a successful communication strategy never seem enough, we draw attention to some welcomed preventions: ordinary communication in normal times becomes critical in crisis situations; no more than two spokespersons are enough to turn crises in history; communicators - the ones that link the organization with its target public - mustn't be overwhelmed by the press; in order not to reach an inevitable point in the crisis the intervention of PR specialists is welcomed especially if the situation is becomes worse.

*Acknowledgement: This paper was drafted within the "Knowledge Based Society - researches,*

debates, perspectives” Project, supported by the Sectorial Operational Program Human Resources Development 2007-2013 (SOP HRD ), financed by the European Social Fund and by the Romanian Government, ID POSDRU/89/1.5/S/56815.

### References

---

1. Coman, Cristina (2009) *Crisis Communication. Techniques and strategies*. Iași: Polirom.
2. Newsom, Doug, Haynes, Jim (2011) *Drafting public relations materials*. 2nd ed.. Iași: Polirom.
3. Zamfir, Cătălin, Vlăsceanu, Lazăr (1993) *Dictionary of sociology*. București: Babel.

### Endnotes

---

1. Jacques Lagroye, *Sociologie politique*, Dalloz, Paris, 1993, pp. 406-408, *apud*. Cristina Coman, *Crisis Communication. Techniques and strategies*, Polirom, Iași Publishing House, 2009, p. 14
2. Cătălin Zamfir, Lazăr Vlăsceanu, *Dictionary of sociology*, Babel, București Publishing House, 1993, p. 145
3. Doug Newsom, Jim Haynes, *Drafting public relations materials*, 2nd ed., Polirom, Iași Publishing House, 2011, p. 414