
Crisis definition and response: Understanding non-profit practitioner perspectives

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Abstract

The everyday actions of public relations practitioners affect and shape an organisation's reputation. In a crisis situation, the communication response of an organisation is as important in a non-profit organisation (NPO) as it is in the private sector and, therefore, vitally important to the public relations practitioners in that field. The non-profit sector of public relations has not been widely studied despite its status as one of the top sectors for employment (Occupational Outlook Handbook, 2008). This is especially true of research exploring how NPOs handle crisis situations.

The current study employs seven in-depth personal interviews with non-profit public relations practitioners to understand how they define organisational crises, how they plan for such crises, and how they react to theoretical response strategies for dealing with these specific crises. The findings of this study further demonstrate that the situational crisis communication theory is applicable to the non-profit sector.

Introduction

Communication after a crisis is essential to restoring an organisation's positive reputation and perhaps, ultimately, its continued success. The crisis response strategy any organisation employs can make the difference between recovery and failure as conceived in the minds of its various publics. Therefore, appropriately addressing a crisis and the publics affected is a skill that would benefit public relations practitioners in managing an organisation's reputation. The current study employs seven in-depth personal interviews with non-profit public relations practitioners to understand how they define organisational

crises, how they plan for such crises and how they react to theoretical response strategies for dealing with these specific crises.

In recent years, a wave of non-profit scandals has shaken the public's confidence in non-profit organisations. For example, the Red Cross suffered a serious scandal surrounding the way donations were handled in the 9/11 Fund and in the mid-1990s the United Way's president was convicted of embezzlement and fraud. This somewhat unsavoury history may have been a contributing factor to recent calls for more regulation of non-profits that have escalated all the way to the floor of the United States Senate. In 2004, the Senate Finance Committee held a hearing on 'Charity oversight and reform: Keeping bad things from happening to good charities' (United States Senate, 2004), in which several witnesses discussed the misuse of charitable contributions for personal gain. This led the committee to hold another hearing to discuss proposals for reform of the non-profit sector in 2005.

Being able to take control and reassure the public in times of crisis is a crucial part of any organisation's public relations, but especially vital to a NPO. Non-profits operate in a shifting environment. They are dependent on their publics and are often held to higher expectations than most for-profit entities. For this reason, they are also organisations that are shaped by the wants and needs of their external environments (Hafsi & Thomas, 2005). Thus, a NPO must express their reactions to reflect their surroundings and the publics that they serve. NPOs are very susceptible to both criticism and potential failure when a crisis occurs. Being able to take control and reassure the public in times of crisis is a crucial part of any organisation's public relations but especially vital to a NPO. One would assume that a NPO with a pre-existing, strong

reputation is more likely to maintain strong support in times of crisis.

NPOs offer a rich area for testing and theory building. As Carson (2002) states, “the non-profit context is one rich with possibility and one deeply neglected from a communication theory standpoint” (p. 264). The review of literature confirms that crisis communication continues to be a hot topic in public relations research, but little attention has been paid to crisis response strategies in one of the largest sectors of public relations practice: NPOs. The lack of research in crisis communication management in the non-profit sector is startling as it is an enormously valuable to the practice of public relations. The purpose of this study is to better understand the non-profit practitioner’s perspective of the definition of a crisis and communication after a crisis for their field.

Literature review

Crisis communication

A few well-known scholars (Benoit, 1995; Coombs, 1995; Ware & Linkugel, 1973) have spent a majority of their careers examining the rhetoric an individual or organisation uses when a crisis occurs. Although, much of this initial research was based on post-hoc, discourse analysis instead of in-depth, primary investigation.

In this early research, the study of crisis communication response focused on corporations and individuals interchangeably without much analysis of where the response originated. Using discourse analysis, many researchers suggested strategies organisations or individuals might employ when faced with a crisis, but most of these strategies were in list form and limited to post-event analyses in specific case studies (Allen & Caillouet, 1994; Benoit, 1995; Coombs, 1995, 1999; Ware & Linkugel, 1973). While helpful, those using case studies generally focused on a crisis situation after the fact, and discourse analysis did not generally delve into the insights of public relations practitioners.

A number of more recent scholars (Cancel, Cameron, Sallot & Mitrook, 1997; Coombs, 2004, 2007; Huang, 2001; Jin & Cameron,

2007) have begun to employ quantitative and experimental research to test various aspects of crisis response strategies and further develop theory. One of the most prominent outcomes of this type of research is Coombs’ Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT). Coombs’ theory suggests how “a crisis might shape the selection of crisis response strategies and/or the effect of crisis response strategies on organisational reputation” (Coombs, 2004, p. 269). The theory suggests that the degree to which the public attributes responsibility for a crisis to an organisation is one of the most important underlying elements for public relations practitioners to consider when drafting their response to a crisis.

In 2007, Coombs published a compilation of his work describing the development and application of the SCCT. This work synthesised previous studies to suggest a prescriptive model for crisis managers. According to Coombs, the three factors that create a potential threat to an organisation’s reputation are its responsibility for the crisis, its crisis history, and its prior relational reputation.

Coombs (2007) suggests that the type of crisis situation (victim, accident, and intentional, previously described by Coombs as the preventable situation) is a frame that shapes how stakeholders interpret the situation. He further explains that crisis history and prior reputation can have “both a direct and indirect effect on the reputation threat posed by the crisis” (2007, p. 167). His previous research established that these two factors could have a direct effect that is separate from the level of crisis responsibility attributed to the organisation (Coombs, 2004). In terms of practical implications, Coombs suggests that if crisis managers understand these three factors, then they will be better able to draft crisis response strategies that minimise reputational damage.

Coombs (2007) clarifies that the foundation of any crisis response begins with the ethical responsibility of informing and adapting information to those directly impacted by the crisis. Only after the physical and psychological concerns of the crisis victims have been met can the public relations

practitioner move onto addressing the organisation's reputation.

Coombs (2007) then separates the crisis response strategies that impact reputation into three categories: "deny," "diminish," and "rebuild" (previously described as "repair"). The SCCT posits that crisis managers should "utilize crisis response strategies with the requisite level of accepting crisis responsibility" (p. 172). Therefore, according to Coombs, every crisis situation can be evaluated and then crisis managers can choose the most appropriate crisis response strategies based on the factors in the SCCT model.

The response strategies an organisation employs in times of crisis may be a critical factor in determining the organisation's future. These findings created a new path for crisis research by demonstrating that not only can crisis response strategies be developed, but speculates which strategies will be most effective in mitigating reputational damage caused by a crisis. However, to be of even greater relevance to the profession, scholars need to expand beyond empirical research to encompass a broader range of audiences and organisations – for example, the non-profit sector.

Based on the lack of theoretical research specific to non-profit crisis communication the author posed the following research question:

RQ1: For each of the three crisis situations, do non-profit public relations practitioners agree that each of Coombs' corresponding crisis response strategies are the most appropriate for that situation?

Liu and Horsley (2007) argue, "the time has come for public relations theory to recognise that different models must be developed for studying the public sector" (p. 391). While those authors primarily addressed the needs of the government sector, the non-profit sector shares the same need for public relations models specific to their unique situations. NPOs operate in an environment that is dependent on their publics' perceptions. Public relations practitioners working in the non-profit sector

need research and theory specific to their situations in order to better prepare and respond to a crisis.

The non-profit sector

Public relations in NPOs has not been widely studied, despite the fact that NPOs are one of the top sectors for public relations employment (Occupational Outlook Handbook, 2008). This paucity of research is especially noticeable when it comes to understanding how NPOs handle crisis situations, despite the fact that NPOs are one of the top sectors in public relations. Previous researchers (Benoit, 1995; Coombs, 2007; Hearit, 2006; Ulmer, Sellnow & Seeger, 2007; Ware & Linkugel, 1973) have studied crisis response and its effect on reputation, but these theories have rarely addressed the non-profit sector (Carson, 2002; Frumkin, 2002; Vernis, 2006). Reputation is a concept important to all public relations practitioners, no matter in what venue they work.

In any sector, the public relations practitioner's job is to manage the organisation-public relationship. Often, the goal of this relationship is the maintenance of a strong reputation in the eyes of the public. Although profit-making and NPOs share this goal, NPOs often have fewer resources to achieve it. Therefore, NPOs frequently must use more creative means to get their messages across to their targeted audiences. Kang and Norton (2004), for example, argue that NPOs may need to use the web as a tool to communicate with their publics to compete with other non-profit and for-profit corporations.

According to O'Neill and Young (1988), the combination of legal constraints, revenue sources, types of personnel and the nature of governance are just some of the things that make NPOs unique compared with other organisations. NPOs also often need to worry about a greater variety of publics (e.g. supporters, volunteers, staff, the population being served and the media) as well as the public at large (Feinglass, 2005). Frumkin (2002) outlines three distinct differences between non-profit and for-profit organisations: they do not coerce participation, they operate

without distributing profits to stockholders, and (perhaps to their detriment) they exist without clear lines of ownership and accountability.

One of the greatest threats to an NPO is the betrayal of public trust. Lee (2004) explains that NPOs with a favourable image are “more likely to be successful whether in fundraising, expansion, new programming, or political support” (p.837). Therefore, if an NPO disappoints its publics, and they lose confidence in the organisation, the NPO risks losing both its reputation and financial support. Many NPOs are unknown to large segments of society until scandal pushes these organisations into the forefront (Vernis, 2006).

Methodology

Because of the scantiness of research about crisis response in NPOs, the researcher elected to conduct exploratory, in-depth interviews with experienced non-profit public relations practitioners to better understand crises in the non-profit sector. This qualitative methodology was chosen because as Hon suggests, “qualitative research reveals new ways of thinking about the topic under investigation” (1997, p. 7).

Rubin and Rubin (1995) state that a goal of qualitative research interviewing is to allow individuals to respond in their own words rather than with the preconceived notions or biases imposed by the researcher. Patton (2002) agrees, noting that quantitative evaluation can force participants to fit their knowledge, experiences and feelings into the evaluator’s preconceived categories. The exploratory nature of this study makes it important to fully understand non-profit practitioners’ experiences in order to identify the differences between crises situations.

Interview participants

A purposeful sampling strategy was used to explore non-profit public relations practitioners’ experiences with organisational crises. “Purposeful sampling focuses on selecting information-rich cases whose study will illuminate the questions under study”

(Patton, 2002, p. 230). Purposeful sampling is the most appropriate approach for this research in order to better understand the field as a whole through the experiences of its practitioners. The scarcity of literature about crisis response in the non-profit sector, in contrast to the rampant headlines about scandals in the non-profit sector, supports the use of this type of method.

To obtain interview participants, the section leader of the Public Relations Society of America’s (PRSA) Association/Non-profit Interest Section was contacted and asked to distribute the researcher’s call for participants by means of the section’s listserv. Ideal participants were public relations practitioners working in the non-profit sector who had at least three to five years of professional experience, decision-making power within their organisations, and who had a recent crisis experience.

Ten potential interviewees responded to the researcher by email and an initial telephone conversation was arranged. The dispersed location of the PRSA Association/Non-profit subjects militated against face-to-face interviews, but the researcher felt that phone interviews could be just as intimate and accurate on the subject of this study. Lindlof and Taylor (2002) suggest that “phone interviews can be as intimate and engrossing for the callers, and ultimately as productive, as those conducted in person” (p.186).

During the initial conversation, the purpose of the study was explained in more detail, respondents were asked about their professional backgrounds, the type of non-profit in which they worked, and confirmed they had a recent experience with an organisational crisis situation. Based on the results of the preliminary interview, seven of the potential interviewees fit the researcher’s criteria. A second conversation was scheduled with each remaining participant and the researcher received permission to record that conversation for transcription. Each interview was audio-taped to ensure accuracy in transcription of the interviews.

During the interview, participants were asked to define an organisational crisis and

their view of the role public relations should play in an organisational crisis situation. They were asked to describe a recent organisational crisis in their organisations, if their organisations currently had a crisis communication plan in place, and their thoughts about the importance of crisis response to their organisations. Participants were also asked to review three hypothetical crisis situations and the theoretically suggested response strategies to allow the researcher to assess whether the participants believed those responses were appropriate for organisations in the non-profit sector (RQ1). Also, the participants were asked for recommendations for crisis response strategies in addition to those suggested by the researcher. Each interview lasted between 60 and 90 minutes.

“Data collection requires that the investigator carefully reflect on, deal with, and report potential sources of bias and error” (Patton, 2002, p.51). Because of these concerns, the researcher shared the interview transcripts with colleagues to assure that researcher bias was minimised and that the interviews were being interpreted neutrally.

It is important to note that the in-depth interview is not a very common approach in public relations research (Austin & Pinkleton, 2006; Broom & Dozier, 1990). The exploratory nature of this study demands inquiry into the knowledge base of public relations practitioners. Without their input it would be difficult for the researcher to support the appropriateness of later empirical studies (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002) as important to non-profit public relations practitioners. The author followed the coding procedures of

Miles and Huberman (1994) in order to organise and code the qualitative findings.

The demographics of the seven participants did not illustrate diversity in race or class. All the participants identified themselves as Caucasian and all claimed they held managerial positions in their respective organisations. Six of the participants were female and one was male. Participants’ ages ranged from the mid-30s to the late 50s. All participants had at least five years of experience in the field of public relations and all held a general Bachelor’s degree, while some held a Master’s degree.

Some participants held titles of manager or director, while others were executives or partners in their organisations. They all worked in NPOs, but the type of organisations ranged greatly. One participant had left a traditional NPO to start her own consulting company that tailors its work to help NPOs. Another worked for one of the largest health NPOs in the Midwest. Other participants worked in organisations that specialise in construction associations, youth services, religious institutions, and social causes. The number of employees who reported to the participants ranged from three to 50. All were members of the Public Relations Society of America and, specifically, members of the Association/Non-profit interest section of that organisation.

The primary daily activities in which the participants engaged differed only slightly. All were in charge of the internal and external communications for their organisations. Two worked closely with a team while the others worked independently. All had a hand in the strategic planning of their organisations’ communication activities.

Table 1. Demographics of interview participants

Gender	Age	Education	Title	Sector	Public relations experience
Female	40-50	Bachelor’s	Director	Association	10 years
Female	40-50	Bachelor’s	Manager	Association	6 years
Female	40-50	Master’s	Vice President	International aid	29 years
Female	50-60	Bachelor’s	Director	Health services	10 years
Female	40-50	Master’s	Consultant	Non-profit	20 years
Female	30-40	Master’s	Director	Religious institution	13 years
Male	30-40	Bachelor’s	Director	Youth services	8 years

Findings

To address the topic of discussion participants were first asked how they defined an organisational crisis. They were also asked to talk about the different types of crisis situations that typically can occur. Participants defined an organisational crisis using several concepts. The most prevalent theme articulated by the participants was the negative connotations of a crisis. One participant noted, “an organisational crisis [is] anything that immediately, negatively impacts the image or operations of the organisation”. All acknowledged the unanticipated role or suddenness of a crisis as well as its long-term impact. Participants’ thoughts dovetail with Coombs’ (1999) own description of crisis situations in “that they actually do or have the potential to create negative or undesirable outcomes” (p. 3). A crisis was represented as something that seriously disrupts the workings of the organisation and of the practitioner’s job. Another interviewee said, “an organisational crisis is anything that disrupts the normal workflow for a significant amount of time and is an aberration”.

Another prevalent theme addressed by the participants was the implications of a crisis on the reputation of an organisation. One practitioner said:

An organisational crisis is anything that would occur that would damage the organisation’s reputation outside of its own walls. Certainly, there’s a potential to damage the reputation among internal stakeholders, which could then be parlayed into an external reputational crisis. But I think anything that has the potential to damage the upstanding good name of the organisation could be termed an organisational crisis.

Participants further noted that a crisis could be anything that can “undermine your reputation”, both internally and externally. One participant categorised types of crises by whether they were focused internally, such as when an “executive director or a staff (member) decide on a certain course of action and implement it before they have buy-in from the board”, or if it was something internal that had

become external without the organisation’s permission.

One participant highlighted the public exposure, saying:

I would say an organisational crisis occurs when you are facing significant media attention. Sometimes it’s for things that you would prefer would not be in the public eye, sometimes it’s because your position is being misrepresented in the public eye, and sometimes it’s because there is a major crisis going on far beyond the scope of your organisation.

This theme of media criticism or attention was implicit in many other participants’ definitions of a crisis, suggesting that they believe a situation may not be a crisis until the media makes it so. One participant’s organisation has prepared extensively for the media attention. “We had them role-play the idea that every crisis had someone that isn’t going to agree with their response, so you have to plan for all those negative responses and all those negative opinions and how you are going to handle those”, said the participant. Another common factor that seemed to be in the minds of all participants was the varying nature of a crisis and the myriad of crisis situations that can occur.

The author also asked participants what they perceived to be the role of public relations in a crisis situation. All participants agreed that public relations plays a key role in non-profit crisis situations. The participants differed on whether public relations took place before, during, or after a crisis. Some participants saw the role of public relations practitioners as those who “anticipate” or “prepare” for a crisis so that they had an idea of how a crisis might impact their organisations. One participant said, “the biggest thing you can do is not wait until there is a crisis. You have to acknowledge the reality that it can and will happen”.

Other participants focused on describing the role of public relations during a crisis. This included tasks such as “providing guidance to leadership”, “clarifying what is going on” and “communicating”. They also acknowledged the need to identify and communicate with multiple

audiences at the same time when a crisis occurs. One participant further suggested that public relations practitioners must remember to communicate internally by letting employees know what's going on and keeping them informed, "because your employees are some of your best ambassadors; if they aren't getting the information sometimes the community [isn't] either".

Finally, all participants highlighted the role of public relations after a crisis has occurred. Public relations was described as "damage control" after the organisation or its leadership has hesitated or failed to take the right corrective action in the early stages of a crisis. Most practitioners agreed it was their role to take corrective action; as one participant said, "minimize whatever damage had already happened and prevent any future damage".

Several participants reflected on the struggle of handling a crisis situation. One participant noted, "public relations is so great because there is always this effort to be proactive. And the problem with a crisis is sometimes you really feel like you have nothing to do but be reactive." Participants also discussed the need to be cognisant of the organisations' reputation during a crisis. To do so, they suggested the need to think strategically and to keep in touch with key stakeholders.

One participant was quite adamant that if there were good, ongoing public relations activities in a NPO, a crisis would not occur. Simply stated "the goal is to never allow that to happen". This participant felt that with "transparency" and "thinking strategically", public relations practitioners could avoid crisis situations completely.

Participants were further asked to define the essential elements of a crisis response plan so that the research might make summations that might apply to all NPOs. Perhaps not surprisingly, the answers to this research question mirrored the generally accepted public relations paradigm: research, planning, implementation and evaluation.

One participant acknowledged that the "key element is research first, so you know what you are talking about". This was further explained as performing internal and external research.

One participant noted how important it is to "identify our audiences" so that the public relations practitioner can understand who has the potential to be impacted by a crisis situation. Another participant explained that she felt it was important to "incorporate the believability and the acknowledgement that [a crisis] can happen" with her entire organisation. She went on to state that one of the worst things a NPO can do is not acknowledge its vulnerability to a crisis.

Many participants agreed with the sentiments expressed by one respondent that a key element of their crisis plan was "to set up a crisis response team" as well as to "secure a spokesperson". Overall, participants said they felt it was essential to have a media response plan in order to handle the questions and phone calls that are inevitable in a crisis situation. Another key element, expressed by almost every participant, was "planning responses". Some practitioners said they had sample statements on hand in case a certain particular crisis situation should arise, while others had very general "go to" boilerplates.

Most participants indicated they considered it essential to be prepared and ready for any situation, however, this did not mean that they were necessarily providing information to the media and the public without being contacted first. For example, one participant described his organisation's position in this way; "generally speaking, our stance is to be prepared. Unless there's an imminent danger to the public, we ordinarily are more responsive to inquiries by the press rather than proactive." All participants shared this sentiment regarding reacting to media inquiries.

Finally, some participants said they felt it was not only necessary to have a crisis plan, but that it was critical to evaluate in order to adapt a crisis plan. One participant noted, "you need to plan those responses, how to assess your plan, how to evaluate it, and, if you ever have to use it, how to keep it updated".

Another theme that emerged from nearly every participant's response was the need to stay away from using the phrase "no comment". Participants were adamant that "there is no hiding, there is no saying 'no

comment” and “we knew that you can’t say ‘no comment’”.

RQ1: For each of the three crisis situations, do non-profit public relations practitioners agree that each of Coombs’ corresponding crisis response strategies is appropriate for that situation?

In order to answer the study’s primary research question, participants were given a press release that exemplified each of the three crisis situations and the most appropriate response suggested for each by Coombs. The researcher then asked participants if they felt the response suggested by Coombs was suitable for a NPO facing the hypothetical crisis.

In the first crisis scenario, participants were presented with an incident in which the organisation was the victim and, following the SCCT the organisation should try to distance itself from the incident and minimise their involvement through the *deny* response. One participant “thought [the deny response] was pretty good” as a strategy. Another said that such a response was “really straightforward”. Another practitioner described the response as “it’s [a] kind of ‘feel sorry for us response’”. Overall, participants said they felt this response was suited to the situation, but were more inclined toward a stronger response that included a concrete call-to-action from the organisation.

In the second crisis situation, participants were presented with an *accident* scenario and the matching *diminish* response. One participant agreed strongly with this response strategy, asserting, “he really stepped up to the plate there and you could see through inference that it was not just ‘too bad that this happened to us’. I would trust this organisation more through this action.” Another participant said she felt similarly stating, “what they did, they did really well”. Overall, participants felt the *diminish* response was, to quote one, “very open” and addressed the situation directly rather than attempting to avoid it.

In the third crisis situation, a *preventable* crisis scenario was presented with the matching *repair* response. One participant responded, “I think both of these quotes are taking a good tack, taking responsibility, and you have to trust

that this will not affect community support and I think that’s the best you can do”. Other participants shared similar sentiments, such as, “he was right to take full responsibility”, “I thought it explained the situation well” and “honesty is always fabulous”. One participant generally agreed, but still stated that “they needed to be more transparent” in addressing this type of crisis.

Discussion

All practitioners in the in-depth interviews were managers and decision-makers in their organisations and had the ability to determine how and when their organisations prepare for crisis situations. In defining an organisational crisis, the participants’ responses thematically mirrored the general crisis literature (Fink, 1989). They agreed that crises were unavoidable misfortunes that were a part of any organisations’ existence.

Participants were noticeably aware of a crisis situation’s possible long-term repercussions and the inevitable negative reputational effects. This parallels the literature that stresses the impact of crisis communication on an organisation’s publics and the direct link between how an organisation responds to a crisis and an organisation’s reputation (Allen and Caillouet, 1994; Benoit, 1995; Coombs & Holladay, 2002).

When asked about the role of public relations in a crisis situation in their NPOs, participants agreed that public relations plays a significant role throughout a crisis scenario, and it is their office or department that usually crafts and delivers the messages to the intended publics. The responses of the participants delineated the critical role and the diverse tasks of public relations practitioners when managing a crisis. Their answers reflected the literature that describes the challenges that public relations practitioners generally face (Coombs, 1999; Lee, Woeste & Heath 2007), such as a lack of media or crisis management training, as well as resource and personnel limitations.

The author was surprised at how systematically the practitioners’ crisis response plans aligned with the classic four-step public relations plan of research, planning,

implementation and evaluation. All participants were veteran practitioners who had experienced several crises during their careers. Therefore, it was interesting to note how seemingly 'textbook' the practitioners' crisis plans were. This was an interesting finding despite literature that describes that academic research in public relations is out of touch with the practice (Botan & Hazleton, 2006).

The interviews also revealed that the participants agreed that a crisis typically involved intense media scrutiny and that their preparation for crisis response must primarily be focused on responding to the media. The degree of preparation, however, varied among participants and across fields and organisational structures. Some participants say that they wait for media attention, while others have gone so far as to draft sample response statements in preparation for any situation in which their organisations could possibly be involved. Also, participants shared the sentiment that the days of trying to manage a crisis situation by not responding to the media, if ever true, are now long gone, and 'no comment' will no longer suffice.

The basic thrust of this research was not only to ascertain how non-profit public relations practitioners defined a crisis situation and the elements of a crisis response plan, but to determine whether they deem the SCCT crisis response strategies as the most appropriate strategy for each of the three crisis situations. All, in fact, overwhelmingly approved. They also all agreed that the response strategies presented in the scenario would be an appropriate first step in their organisations' efforts to manage a crisis and that the response strategies would apply equally to a NPO as well as a for-profit corporation.

The results of the in-depth, qualitative interviews help to validate the appropriateness of the SCCT crisis response strategies in the non-profit sector in addition to previous, experimental (Sisco, 2009) studies. The practitioners' confirmation of the SCCT strategies adds a practical contribution that many other crisis communication theories do not possess. The symbiotic relationship between practice and theory can only further

the knowledge and theory in public relations, especially in crisis communication. The inclusion of practitioners with experience and expertise in the non-profit sector adds power to the application of this theory to the non-profit sector, and possibly to all organisational sectors in which public relations is practiced.

During a crisis situation, the ability to maintain a favourable reputation and to sustain the public's engagement at all times is at risk. Public relations practitioners working in the public sector need to be prepared to handle the onslaught of media and public outcry when incidents occur. The ability to maintain a favourable reputation and sustain the public's engagement are primary goals of NPOs. During a crisis situation, both of these variables are at risk and practitioners working for NPOs need to have knowledge about which crisis response strategies are most appropriate for their situation. Choosing the correct strategy can aid them in managing the crisis situation properly, but also, ultimately, helping the organisation remain successful.

The findings of this study confirm that at least some elements of SCCT may be beneficial for a NPO in maintaining its positive reputation in the eyes of its most important asset, its publics. These findings also demonstrate that SCCT is effective across organisational sectors. Further research should empirically apply SCCT to the non-profit sector; various case studies and circumstances will be able to further test the theory's application. Public relations practitioners would benefit greatly from research that supports crisis communication theory that can apply to all sectors of their field.

Conclusions

The everyday actions of public relations practitioners affect and shape an organisation's reputation. In a crisis situation, the communication response of an organisation is as important in a NPO as it is in the private sector and, therefore, vitally important to the public relations practitioners in that field.

The findings of this study demonstrate that SCCT has such applicability, and the continuing valuable input of practitioners can

only further verify the theory's legitimacy. Through in-depth interviews, this study demonstrated that the SCCT is germane to the crisis communication of non-profit public relations and can specifically aid these practitioners. Exploratory research, like that presented in this study, can help confirm which elements are integral in theory development and, ultimately, contribute to a growing, evidence-based body of knowledge. The in-depth interview has not had widespread use in public relations research. Arguably, however, valuable insights into the field can be obtained by sitting down with practitioners and deeply conversing with them about issues and concepts that are important. Practitioners' insights can help scholars interested in crisis communication develop and expand theory to improve the practice of public relations.

The premise of the SCCT is to "match the level of responsibility and aid to victims in the crisis response strategy that would be warranted by the crisis responsibility and reputational damage generated by the crisis situation" (Coombs & Holladay, 2002). Coombs determined that each of the three crisis situations has a preferred matching crisis response strategy, one response that can be considered the most appropriate for that situation. The findings of this study confirm that public relations practitioners in the public sector agree with the theories' assumptions.

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