

## **Crisis intensifiers: from Mild to Radioactive —why crisis sometimes gets out of hand.**

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When crisis strikes, quick and effective response is needed to mitigate its effects. Done right, it can turn a potentially negative situation into positive outcome. There are, however, factors; which may intensify crises, make the impact worse, or even blunt the impact of the crisis response strategies. Such factors include the media's interest in, and the public's seemingly insatiable appetite for sensationalism.

For instance, while crisis can strike any size organization, studies indicate that the larger and respected an organization, the more sensational a crisis will be; hence such organization is subjected to more critical media scrutiny. Coupled with the media's ability to share such information widely and instantaneously, a mere rumor or speculation can morph into a full blown crisis in no time at all potentially damaging reputation and undermining organizational legitimacy to exist.

Additionally, crisis intensifiers include: crisis history of the organization, relationship with stakeholders, severity of the damage, hesitation, retaliation, lying, pontification, confrontation, evasiveness and litigation. Each is discussed.

*Crisis history of the organization.* Some organizations are notorious for ignoring societal expectations such as labor, environmental and safety regulations. Some may survive relatively minor accidents and yet, at their peril, ignore its lessons. The investigation into the February 2003 Columbia shuttle accident suggested this assertion. NASA's attitude toward safety was said to improve little even after the 1986 Challenger disaster (AP, 2003).

*Relationship with stakeholders.* An entity's relationship with its stakeholders impacts how deeply a crisis is viewed. It also impacts stakeholders' willingness to be persuaded regardless of response strategies employed. A mutual trusting relationship between the entity and its stakeholders can create goodwill from which to draw in times of crisis. The Ford Explorer and Firestone tire debacle, described above, provides an example. In a crisis, neither company would be afforded the benefit of doubt nor forgiveness as neither was especially endeared to the stakeholders as a result of their public spat.

*Severity of the damage.* A crisis resulting in loss of lives; or in extensive losses of income and life savings, takes on greater significance than say, one with loss of minor profits only. The just concluded Enron case provides the example. With the Enron collapse, nothing associated with the company was spared. In addition to loss to property and loss of lifetime income investments for the stakeholders, those involved were convicted and sent to prison for a long time.

*Hesitation.* In responding to the crisis, there must not be hesitation as it only makes the organization or spokesperson appears indecisive, incompetent or, worse, callous. In communication, perception is usually reality. When Vice President Dick Cheney accidentally shot a friend on a weekend hunting trip on February 11, 2006, it was four days when he finally spoke publicly about it to the media. As a result of his hesitation to respond publicly about it, what was a simple accident on a weekend hunting trip with friends had morphed into a crisis. The media and the public had begun to attribute it to the White House's reputation for secrecy and high-handedness (Lockheed, 2006).

*Retaliation.* When one is accused in a crisis or conflict situation, he is embarrassed, belittled, in other words, his face is threatened. A face is a metaphor for someone's or an organization's image and reputation. There are two types of faces: Positive face, the desire for others to appreciate, understand and approve the face or image presented; whereas, negative face is the desire for others not to embarrass or impose on them. According to Ting-Toomey (1994), facework or face negotiation theory refers to specific verbal and nonverbal messages that help to maintain and restore face loss, and to uphold and honor face gain. Depending on culture, one way is revenge in which case the accused attempts to make an accuser share his pain as a result of an accusation.

*Lying.* Another form of face managing tactic, lying implies deliberately misleading the audience about the cause of the incident or, on what would be done to mitigate the effect of the crisis on the stakeholders.

*Pontification.* Along the line of lying, above, is pontification, boasting or embellishment. Instead of meekness or contriteness, this represents an idea of sounding more than one really is or needs to appear in the event of a crisis situation.

*Confrontation.* Irritants abound everywhere amid a crisis situation. From the media seeking information, to family members inquiring about their loved ones, to stakeholders who

just want assurance their investments are safe or their jobs would be there the next day, it can be overwhelming for an unprepared spokesperson. No matter how overwhelmed, the image of a spokesperson at the podium wagging his finger in a confrontational mode at the media can send the wrong message, keeping the issue alive, instead of making it quickly go away.

*Evasiveness.* This means not being forthcoming with information, or trying to make things confusing. When a crisis happens, there are information voids the media want filled, and dissonance, a feeling of discomfort the stakeholders want reduced or eliminated altogether.

*Litigation.* Like confrontation, above, litigation or court involvement only keeps the issue alive, brings more attention to the issue and, by extension, the organization, and shine bad light on the organization longer than necessary.

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