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Training future crisis communication advisers in crisis response: Applying scenario-based learning

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Experiencing a crisis, reflecting on it, and using the insights gained for future scenarios is a crucial component of crisis management training. However, this is difficult to practice. We incorporated scenario-based learning (SBL) into our crisis communication course, where student groups create video statements on a crisis, choosing from one of six scenarios. Teachers provide each group with specific and additional information, making it essential to consider the different perceptions of stakeholders during an evolving situation. The strength of this exercise is that it shows how small contextual changes can significantly impact crisis communication outcomes. Student appraisal of the exercise is high, indicating that they find it valuable and engaging. This innovative method bridges the gap between academic literature and practical application, preparing students for real-world crisis communication challenges.

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Introduction and rationale

Crisis situations can be complex and multifaceted, affecting both governments and corporate organizations. In the governmental arena, such situations often require a public leader to address the population, explain what has occurred, and provide broader context (Boin et al., 2016; Stern, 2013). In such scenarios, it is crucial to find the right framing and narrative to reduce uncertainty and offer hope (Noordegraaf & Newman, 2011; Pennebaker & Lay, 2002). A widely praised example was New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern, who showed public leadership and compassion in the aftermath of the Christchurch mosque shootings in 2019 and during the COVID-19 pandemic (McGuire et al., 2020). In the corporate sphere, CEOs and other representatives of an organization respond to crisis situations or allegations that affect their brand. Well-known examples include the YouTube response of president Patrick Doyle of Domino's Pizza (Young & Flowers, 2012) after two employees posted videos of adulterated food on YouTube in April 2009, or the response by United Airlines CEO Oscar Munoz to a viral video of a passenger being forcibly removed from one of the company's airplanes (Benoit, 2018).

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Experiencing a crisis, reflecting on it, and using the insights gained for future scenarios is a crucial part of crisis management training. To train future spokespeople in crisis communication, we as teachers see it as our duty to guide them as best we can. Crisis communication is a field where every word counts. Responding in a crisis requires carefully chosen language to ensure that all stakeholders feel acknowledged and to demonstrate that all perceptions are taken seriously. A misstep can easily be made, which may result in reputational damage. This makes it all the more important not only to teach theoretical concepts but also to prepare students for real-world challenges. For instructors of crisis communication, the challenge lies in imparting lessons and experiences to students who lack practical experience. Student evaluations have also indicated a clear desire for the inclusion of more practical exercises, highlighting the importance of bridging theory and practice in the classroom. Drawing from our roles as teachers in the master's program for crisis and security management, we have found that discussing numerous case studies is crucial for preparing students for future crises. Additionally, our experience shows that students gain significant insights from hands-on exercises. This underscores the importance of simulations in teaching crisis communication (Pyle, 2018). Unlike reading about another organization's crisis response, engaging in practical exercises requires students to craft their own language, choose the right words themselves, and strike a tone that meets the expectations of various stakeholders. This active involvement helps them internalize the complexities of crisis communication more effectively. By engaging students in simulation activities and thorough discussions, educators facilitate interactive learning. This helps students bridge gaps in their knowledge of the curriculum and enhances their learning results (Vlachopoulos & Makri, 2017).

As part of the course, students are introduced to situational crisis communication theory (SCCT) by Coombs (1998), which is typically applied to corporate-oriented case studies. However, since SCCT and similar models—such as Benoit's (1995) image repair (or restoration) theory—are not always well suited for contexts where public organizations are the primary communicators, we also incorporate a more public-oriented framework. The public meaning-making framework (Jong, 2017) is used to highlight the role of public leadership during crises, emphasizing that a significant part of this leadership is inherently communicative.

In order to practice with these theories, we incorporated scenario-based learning (SBL) into our program. This is an educational approach that uses realistic, open-ended scenarios, sometimes referred to as “business games” (Hallinger & Wang, 2019). This method employs storylines that encourage problem-solving and critical thinking to determine the most effective crisis response strategies. As Angafor et al. (2023) observe, unlike traditional classroom-based learning with passive activities such as lectures, memorization, and note-taking, experiential learning through SBL is an active, learner-focused approach. According to Nickerson and Davidson (2024), this type of scenario-based exercise engages learners in authentic performance tasks within a context similar to what they will encounter in their professional careers, which makes it highly relevant for their future working environment in crisis communication.

What distinguishes this approach from many other courses is the use of a shared baseline scenario across all student groups, supplemented with group-specific variations. These subtle modifications are designed to demonstrate how seemingly minor differences in context can significantly influence the effectiveness of a crisis communication response.

Each year, our cohort of around 100 master's students comes from a wide range of international backgrounds. There are numerous advantages to having such a highly international classroom, particularly in relation to multicultural education (Ameny-Dixon, 2004). When students bring diverse perspectives to the same issues, it deepens their understanding of theoretical concepts. Classroom discussions demonstrate that there is no single path out of a crisis; rather, appropriate responses can vary, depending on the cultural context. This challenges biases on Western-centric strategies (Diers-Lawson, 2016) and encourages students to critically reflect on the implications of different choices.

By the end of the SBL activity in our crisis communication course, students achieved several outcomes through this active learning technique: (1) they gained an understanding of the importance and key elements of crisis response strategies, considering the perceptions of different stakeholders; (2) they increased their familiarity with relevant reference materials; (3) they became better equipped to evaluate crisis communication responses in real-life scenarios; and (4) they developed into more effective future advisers in the field of crisis communication.

The activity

The assignment is divided into three stages, detailed below.

Stage 1

In the first stage, groups are presented with six different case studies. Ideally, groups consist of about five students. As noted in the literature, smaller groups tend to score higher on perceived participation and report greater satisfaction (Kooloos et al., 2011). Each group reads through all the scenarios and selects one for their assignment. During the selection process, multiple groups are allowed to choose the same scenario. The available scenarios cover both crises in the public domain as well as corporate crises. This stage involves discussing the pros, cons, and potential crisis response strategies for each case within the group. All scenarios used in this stage can be found in Appendix 1.

The first scenario involves a tragic incident in a supermarket where a customer is fatally struck, necessitating a response from the CEO to address liability and public concerns. The second scenario centers on an international clothing company facing severe backlash after an investigative journalist exposes the use of child labor in its supply chain, requiring the CEO to address ethical misconduct and restore public trust. In the third scenario, a customer at a fast-food restaurant suffocates on a toy found in her hamburger, prompting the CEO to tackle public safety concerns and manage the ensuing legal and reputational challenges. The fourth scenario involves a homeless person who, feeling desperate due to unresolved help requests, sets himself on fire in a municipal building, leading the mayor to respond to public outrage and navigate the complex aftermath. The fifth scenario describes a climate protest at a steel factory where a protester dies after falling into machinery. This devastating incident has ignited public outrage and scrutiny as questions arise about the safety measures in place and the responsibilities of both the factory and the protest organizers, requiring

the director of the advocacy group to respond. The final scenario details riots at a festival with free admission, resulting in a rioter's death by police action, compelling the mayor to respond to the situation and manage public accountability.

As an example, the detailed scenario for the supermarket crisis is as follows:

Scenario 1. Fatal incident at supermarket

In a bustling supermarket, a tragic incident unfolded. A customer, while browsing the aisles, was fatally struck by a cascading pile of soup cans that toppled from a store shelf. The precarious nature of the stacked cans has raised concerns about the supermarket's liability in this unfortunate accident. As future crisis and disaster management professionals, your main task is to prepare a video statement on behalf of the CEO of the supermarket chain. You must carefully consider the impact, the aftermath, address public concerns, and navigate the complex legal and public relations challenges that arise in the wake of this incident. The CEO serves as a spokesperson.

Stage 2

Once the groups have made their final choices, we move to the second stage of the assignment. Here, groups receive additional information that slightly alters the circumstances of the case study. This additional information is different for each group, meaning that even groups choosing the same initial scenario must adapt their responses differently.

For instance, a group that selected scenario 1, which pertains to a situation at a local supermarket, will be given the following additional information:

A customer reported to the media that she had warned the supermarket owner about the unstable pile of cans ten minutes before they toppled over. She had already left the supermarket at the time of the incident but was shocked to learn from the news that the collapse occurred just minutes after her departure.

Another group that selected the same base scenario will receive different additional input:

This is not the first incident at this supermarket. One and a half years ago, another customer died in the supermarket due to a slippery floor that went unnoticed because there were no warning signs.

This two-step approach is designed to intensify the learning experience of students, particularly for those who choose the same scenario but find that even slightly different circumstances can have severe implications for an appropriate crisis response strategy. Related to crisis communication theory, this might show that different scenarios with slightly different backgrounds can lead to significant differences in the necessary crisis response strategies, based on SCCT (Coombs, 2010). For example, although fallen soup cans might fall into the accidental cluster (Coombs, 2010) for one group, where no one can be held responsible, it might lead to more severe responsibility in a slightly different situation for another group.

Third stage

Once the groups have created their final crisis response, they are required to record a two- to three-minute apology video, which is then shown in class and reflected upon. The video is supposed to begin with a journalist presenting the case, followed by a

company representative or public leader responding to the crisis. The purpose of these videos is introduced with reference to recent studies on the sincerity of YouTube apologies (Sandlin & Gracyalny, 2018) and the level of mortification in such videos (Choi & Mitchell, 2022). For practical reasons—primarily due to the large group size in our course—the video serves as the core of the assignment. For instructors working with smaller groups, alternatives could include responding to scenarios in other formats (e.g. social media posts, news releases) or through other methods (e.g. a press conference instead of a video).

Debriefing

In class, strong and convincing elements are highlighted and discussed. The lecturer asks students to explain their deliberations and the reasons behind their choice of wording, while also comparing their contributions to the videos presented by other groups, especially those on similar topics. Depending on the scenario, different questions can be asked of the groups. These may include, for example, how the person apologizing in the video addresses all the different stakeholders.

For instance, is it likely that consumers have been reassured? How does the CEO or mayor manage to show empathy without blaming their own staff for the mistake that led to the incident? To what extent has the additional information been influential, such as by revealing that a similar incident has occurred before and thus introducing the concept of crisis history (Coombs, 2010)? Is a distinction made between eyewitnesses and those directly involved and others who are more distant but still want to understand what happened? Additionally, to what extent does giving a video statement impact the crisis response strategy compared to a written response? Through this discussion, it also becomes clear that the options for crisis communication response strategies offer a range of possibilities, allowing an organization or government to emphasize different aspects and choose the most appropriate way forward. Crisis communication is not a simple choice between right or wrong; it involves responding in a way that acknowledges the impact and meets the expectations of the environment, while fitting the cultural context (Falkheimer & Heide, 2006).

After the videos have been discussed in class, students do not have the opportunity to improve or resubmit their recordings. The pedagogical reasoning behind this approach is based on the idea that students should not be able to incorporate strong ideas from other groups to improve their own work. By requiring all groups to submit their videos in advance, an equal playing field is created. The discussion is then primarily intended to explore the different approaches taken by each group and to identify their strengths and weaknesses. In doing so, the theoretical concepts of crisis communication are brought to life.

Appraisal

To arrive at an objective measure, the students were asked to look back on this assignment at the end of the course and after all grades had been shared. The feedback was based on a questionnaire that was sent out after the course had ended. In this questionnaire, students were asked about how their group came to choose a particular case, what

recommendations for changes they had, and what their overall appraisal of this activity was. The population consisted of 41 students (aged 23 with standard deviation 1.75), of whom 29 were female and 11 were male, with one person preferring not to disclose. The overall rating on a 10-point scale was 7.4 (SD = 0.896) for the assignment.

Based on feedback from students, in stage 1, the cases were selected through polls and discussions within the groups. Most of the groups discussed all scenarios in plenary sessions and arrived at the final scenario through a process of elimination. Drafting a group statement in stage 2 encouraged them to discuss personal preferences. Given the international background of the students, they also tend to discuss the impact of cultural differences on the expectations of a crisis response and the appropriate level of mortification, thereby encouraging critical thinking.

According to the students, those who rated the assignment lower overall preferred writing to recording the video, favoring a more theoretical approach. For teachers, the feedback highlighted the importance of being clear about how the videos are graded, distinguishing between the content of the statement and the acting, which should not count too heavily toward the final grade. Students with higher grades shared several comments, such as that the assignment compelled them to incorporate the suggested literature, they appreciated its practical orientation, and it stimulated group cooperation and critical thinking.

Conclusion

From the lecturer's point of view, we believe students were easily engaged through this exercise, generating interesting discussions both within the groups and during plenary sessions. We echo Angafor et al. (2023) and Nickerson and Davidson (2024) in stating that, from a teacher's point of view, not only does SBL offer realistic scenarios that are highly relatable to everyday life, but this approach is also very fitting for preparing future professionals in the field of crisis communication. The strength of this exercise lies in the use of a shared baseline scenario for all student groups, supplemented with specific variations for each group. These subtle differences allow students to experience how seemingly minor contextual changes can have a significant impact on the effectiveness of a crisis communication strategy.

This approach encourages students to reflect on crisis communication response strategies used in academia. Additionally, it enables teachers to add an element of fun to the classroom experience by incorporating specific elements into the scenarios, contributing to an engaging assignment for both teachers and students. On a more practical note, we will change the setup of the presentation of the videos in upcoming courses. Instead of watching all videos at once, we will spread them over the seven-week course, bundling similar cases in one session. This allows for more in-depth reflection on the deviations from the core scenario and the implications for crisis communication response strategies.

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Appendix 1: Scenarios for group assignment

The group assignment consists of a vlog in which one of your group members is on camera, making a statement on behalf of an organization in crisis.

The aim of this vlog is to convince your most important audiences that you care about what happened. The vlog first explains what happened from the point of view of a journalist (approximately one minute), followed by a video statement of the organization involved (approximately two minutes long).

Procedure

1. Your group selects one of the scenarios below.
2. One of the group members notifies the teachers (by e-mail) of the scenario you want to base your vlog on. The teachers will then provide your group with additional information on the context of the crisis. Together, this will serve as the input for the assignment.
3. We will watch and discuss all statements in class.

Scenario 1: Fatal incident at supermarket

In a bustling supermarket, a tragic incident unfolded. A customer, while browsing the aisles, was fatally struck by a cascading pile of soup cans that toppled from a store shelf. The precarious nature of the stacked cans has raised concerns about the supermarket's liability in this unfortunate accident. As future crisis and disaster management professionals, your main task is to prepare a video statement on behalf of the CEO of the supermarket chain. You must carefully consider the impact, the aftermath, address public concerns, and navigate the complex legal and public relations challenges that arise in the wake of this incident. The CEO serves as a spokesperson.

Scenario 2: Child labor and fashion company

In the world of fashion, a prominent clothing company that operates internationally is facing a severe crisis. An investigative journalist has uncovered evidence suggesting that the company continues to utilize child labor in some of its manufacturing facilities, despite the company's public claims of eradicating such practices from its supply chain. This revelation has ignited a firestorm of public outrage and scrutiny, with accusations of deception and ethical misconduct. As crisis and public relations experts, your primary task is address the public's concerns, provide accurate information, and devise a strategic response on behalf of the company to regain trust and mitigate the potential legal and reputational consequences. The CEO serves as the spokesperson.

Scenario 3: Fatal incident at fast food company

In a popular fast-food restaurant chain, a tragic incident has occurred. A customer, enjoying a meal with her family, tragically suffocated after choking on a small toy that had somehow ended up in her hamburger. The investigation suggests that the presence of the toy in the

hamburger was most likely not the customer's fault, raising questions about food safety and quality control within the restaurant. This distressing incident has generated widespread public concern and scrutiny. As crisis and disaster management professionals, your primary task is to address the public's concerns and navigate the potential legal and reputational challenges that arise for the fast-food restaurant chain. The CEO serves as the spokesperson.

Scenario 4: Tragic incident at municipality building

A homeless person sets himself ablaze in a municipal building, driven by desperation. Although help had been offered by the municipality, he had waited for months without any resolution, feeling he had no other option. Tragically, he succumbs to his injuries. This distressing incident has sparked widespread public concern and scrutiny. As crisis and disaster management professionals, your primary task is to address the public's concerns and navigate the potential legal and reputational challenges that arise for both the municipality and the mayor, who serves as the spokesperson.

Scenario 5: Protest at steel factory

In the midst of a large-scale climate protest organized by an environmental advocacy group, protesters enter the facilities of a steel factory to draw attention to the environmental impact of such industries. Tragically, during the protest, one of the demonstrators accidentally falls into a dangerous machine within the factory and suffers a fatal injury. This devastating incident has ignited public outrage and scrutiny, as questions arise about the safety measures in place and the responsibilities of both the factory and the protest organizers. As crisis and disaster management professionals, your primary task is to address the public's concerns, provide accurate information, and navigate the complex legal and reputational challenges that arise. The director of the advocacy group serves as the spokesperson.

Scenario 6: Riots at the beach

It is a sunny day in the summer. At the beach in your municipality, a free festival is in full swing. After a pleasant afternoon with various artists, as dusk falls, a group of rioters descends upon the festival grounds. The situation turns into riots. The police, called in hastily, try to restore order to the chaos. In the process, however, one of the rioters is killed by a police bullet. The mayor is called to account, as he is in charge of the police. Provide a statement in which the mayor responds to the situation.