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The relationship of organizations with the media in crisis situations

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Abstract

An interesting facet in the life of the organizations that we want to highlight in this article is to present some aspects of the relationships with the media during organizational crisis. Complex and complicated, this relationship involves the activation of numerous levers that build a necessary communication with the media. The dimensions of our approach have not allowed us to highlight all the underlying aspects on which such a relationship is built, but we have drawn only a few general frameworks that are important to follow if organizations are confronted with moments of crisis. The crisis management team in the organization plays an important role in maintaining and developing communication with journalists in a correct way, in communicating information on the crisis, on the evaluation of its effects, on rebuilding the organization. The tools that help build the organization's relationship with the media are the press release, the press conference and the press kit. The press release during a crisis must be concise, with a brief, but accurate summary of events, with an indication of the measures taken by the organization to mitigate the effects of the crisis. In turn, the press conference will be prepared by knowing the positions taken by journalists, by emphasizing the role of the spokesperson. The press kit is a lot richer; it is one of the most important ways to relate to the media. The clarity of the relationship certainly leads to the efficiency of the measures taken to fight the crisis. The press remains a fast way of communication between the organization and its audiences.

1 Crisis in organizations - general milestones

Considered as a living organism in various stages of its existence, any organization may face a crisis situation that may disrupt its normal functioning

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and the position built in a particular community. Starting from the etymology of the term *crisis*, taken from the medical field, which signifies a turning point of a disease that can evolve or regress, we can say that within the institutional framework, the crisis is also an impairment of the good functioning of an organization that can escape the decline or may fall into it. Regardless of when a crisis occurs in the life of organizations or the type of crisis manifested, it has always been considered that the difficult period can be overcome through communication. In a previous article, we talked about how crises affect the image of an organization. We stick to the opinion that, for a proper image to be built up, any organization must go through a period of normality, a period in which values, ideologies, symbols emerge and consolidate in depth. In such situations, a crisis, be it sudden or slow, superficial or profound, caused by internal or external factors, will not seriously hinder the trajectory and proper functioning of an organization. Of course, it will not go without any trace on the organization's activity, so the exact knowledge of the type of crisis is essential. We join in the continuation of our approach to the opinions of some specialists in organizational management, on the crisis. This is defined as a situation in which "the whole system is affected, so that its physical existence is threatened; in addition, the core values of system members are threatened to such an extent that individuals are either forced to misinterpret these values or to develop defence mechanisms against them" (Pauchant, T.C., Mitroff, LI., 1992, p. 12). On the other hand, the crisis is counted as the result of "environmental threats, correlated with the weaknesses of the organization; it occurs when environmental threats interact with the weaknesses within the organization" (Engelhoff, W.G., Sen, F., 1992, p. 447). Patrick D'Humieres regarded crisis as "an unexpected period that questions the organization's responsibility to the public and threatens its ability to continue its activity normally" (D'Humieres, P., 1994, p. 272).

Eliminating a crisis situation requires the organization to master, coordinate and control the arising emergencies by rethinking some measures, prepared in time. Effective crisis management leads the organization to its ability to maximize its chances and reduce the damage caused by the new situation. Communication is, of course, such a measure. Besides, we believe, the relationship with the media is one of the elements that can help an organization overcome the moment of crisis. An important measure that needs to be taken immediately is to appoint a spokesperson, chosen from among credible people, able to understand the aspects of the crisis, its implications, and solutions that can help the organization overcome these moments. The person designated as a spokesman will set an official point of view and maintain a permanent connection with the press. So he/she needs to have sound knowledge and skills to communicate effectively with journalists. This becomes all the more important as the media can play a decisive role in overcoming crisis situations in an organization's life. Many times, the media crisis

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joins the real crisis, amplifying it. There have been situations where fluctuations at the level of management of organizations, panic, excessive justification, or counterattack have damaged the relationship with the media and caused a series of adverse reactions to the organization. Of course, we are not talking about the need to develop a relationship of obedience to the media, but to maintain a mutually supportive climate. For when the"organization sees a threat in the presentation of facts to the media and consequently conceals information, then the materials on the crisis are distorted and the public believes that the organization's resources to cope with the crisis are much scarcer. Fearing that disclosure of data would harm the image of the organization, it guarantees, in fact, the continuous and detailed publication of information on the crisis long after its cessation, as well as the abundance of sensational data, because the media will resort to external sources that often give rise to rumours and speculation" (Newsom D. et al., 2003, p. 362).

2 Crisis in organizations and the media

It is well known that the media, in the quest for sensationalism and the desire to have priority in an expanding market, are attracted by the less normal events in the life of some organizations, more precisely, by the exposure of crisis situations. At this point, there is also a gap in communicating with journalists, as the management of organizations is preoccupied with taking effective emergency measures rather than supporting journalists in search of information. Without support, in their haste to publish the news, media representatives will appeal to other sources or openly oppose the organization in crisis. This attitude can only deepen the abnormal situation of the organization, because effective communication with the audience of the organization, including the media, has an important role in managing the crisis.

The role of the press in mitigating the effects of the crisis that devastates an organization is all the more important as people are aware of most events through newspapers, radio or television. Therefore, it is necessary that information relating to a special situation traversed by organizations in crisis situations be properly made, so as not to amplify the state of affairs, to help public opinion contribute, where appropriate, in solving some manifestations of the crisis. Because the communication problems of an organization faced with a moment of crisis relate to four particular aspects: internal communication of that organization, communication with its audiences, communication with crisis actors and communication with the media.

As regards this last type of communication, it is important that the organization be the first to contact the media, so it must write and transmit a *press release* immediately. Its role is to inform journalists about the situation and the measures that have already been implemented. The press release must be concise, no more than one page, it should contain a description of the event, the way the

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organization recognizes the mistakes that led to the crisis, the name of the person in charge of the crisis management team, and the manner in which the problem of the organization is expected to be solved. After the first press release, others will follow in time, as the public needs to be informed about the evolution or involution of the crisis, about the organization's constant efforts to remove or, at least, limit the magnitude of the crisis.

3 Press tools used to solve organizational crises

Once the state of the organization has been made public, journalists will search for more and more information, document, analyze similar situations in other organizations, and reveal the way they have overcome the difficult moments. The interest of the media will be all the more greater, as the consequences of the crisis are more severe: we mean here the loss of human life, the production of major material damage, disturbed social, economic or cultural systems, the involvement of some personalities in crisis. There is, therefore, a need for direct, urgent communication between the media and the organization, which often translates into a *press conference*. It becomes an effective means of informing journalists, answering questions, clarifying, even countering some press attacks. What is important is that if the organizations make a press conference, their representatives are ready to know the in-depth situation of the institution, to honestly answer the press questions, some of them even awkward. The crisis team will know the positions, information, attitudes, strategies that will be revealed to journalists, and the spokesman will become the most important person in this duel of questions and answers. Numerous situations are reported in the literature in which the spokesmen of some institutions have been subjected to simulations similar to crises, precisely because of the need to successfully deal with meetings with the media.

The third stage, encountered by an organization in crisis during the contact with the media, is represented by the *press kit*. Of all the communication tools between organizations and journalists, the press kit is certainly the most important, as it provides essential data on the organization, its history, traditions, values, and its personalities. Also, it includes a list of the crisis team members, who make up the core of the struggle against the difficult situation of the organization.

The compilation of a press kit takes long, so the public relations specialists prepare it beforehand, during the normality period, initially sketching out the general lines, then assembling them in an efficient and complete document. Of course, when the crisis is triggered, information already existing in a press kit will be supplemented by new, updated information, absolutely necessary for the media to know the state of affairs of the organization.

Crisis moments require fair, fast, concrete, effective measures; therefore, in relations with the media, public relations specialists must adopt the best attitude,

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namely *transparency*. This implies a total openness to the information needs of the public and to those who help this process of knowledge, i.e. journalists. The organization's contact with the media is permanent, as the data transmitted is based on promptness, rapidity and fairness. Thus, specialists in the organization's public relations department are advised to know in detail the measures imposed by the crisis, to convoke the media, even to build a nucleus to help journalists receive the necessary information. The image of the organization, as perceived by the media, will be one of solidarity, of accurate knowledge of the factual situation, of holding all the information communicated to the media in order to avoid repetition.

By meeting these needs, the organization avoids the launch of rumours, of inaccuracies that the media can take over and which do nothing but disturb the right way to solve the crisis. Negotiations between journalists and representatives of the organization are sensitive, as the state of affairs is also sensitive, capable of leading to a resolvable crisis or, in the worst case, to the decline of the organization. Therefore, the information should be carefully selected; some of it may be published, with other remaining in the confidential area.

4 Conclusions

Regardless of the manner in which the relationship with journalists is achieved - through a press release, a press conference, a press kit or even face to face - it must be approached calmly, without pressure from one side or the other. The clarity of the relationship certainly leads to the efficiency of the measures taken to fight the crisis. The media remain a fast way of communication between the organization and its audiences.

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