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Organisations and the Communication Crisis

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ABSTRACT

In creating this approach, we stared from re-updating the concept of communication crisis, in order to track the effects this disruption has on the image of organisations. For, as we know, to build an image favourable for an institutional structure involves hard, continuous work, and the deterioration of this image in a period of crisis can determine its evolution, it can even lead to the disappearance of that organisation. We tried to emphasise the correct and rapid ways by which the crisis can be managed, and communication is the fastest and one of the most efficient means. Public relations play an essential role at this stage, because they help in developing the messages to be transmitted to various types of audiences. *Communication during the crisis highlights the pragmatic aspect of communication, because when the information is lapidary, there is not enough time to collect data and to inform you.*

Key words: *communication, crisis, image.*

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01. Contemporary companies form a world of interdependencies where communication is absolutely necessary. If for the human being the information and communication form a necessity, for the organisational being, communication is the act that can trigger its existence, can facilitate its expansion or can determine its stagnation, even its disappearance. The communication crisis becomes a component of the organisational crisis. It can precede, accompany and amplify the structural crisis of the organisation. A poor internal communication regarding the organisation's changes and prospects often lead to triggering a major conflict between the members of the organisation and management often degenerates in an organisational crisis. From the same perspective, we can state that an incoherent, ambiguous and contradictory external communication on the proposed goals and possibilities to achieve them can put the organisation in a situation of conflict with the companies in the environment where they operate. The consequences of the situation of conflict can be objectified in drastic measures or decisions, with negative consequences in the operation of the organisation and in public promotion of its own interests, thus creating conditions favourable for its entrance in crisis. We refer here to the organisations that have not publicly communicated the degree of risk of their operation or of the services provided on the market. These may be nuclear plants, plants of chemical or biological products, the production of which, but especially the result of this production could affect the environment, health and safety of people.

02. When an organisation is in crisis, the immediate consequences arise on the forms of communication. These, whether internal or external, become chaotic, unplanned, incoherent.

Externally, communication is usually limited to reactions of defence, of justification and response to journalists' questions. As a result of the communication crisis, the organisation may lose local, national and even international relations with other relevant organisations and categories of audiences, which could set a true support

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in overcoming the crisis. At these times, the whole activity of the organisation changes, because managements make efforts to particularly solve the material, financial and technological matters; less attention is given to the involvement of the human factor whose actions may be unpredictable and counterproductive for the organisation.

Internally, when an organisation is faced with a crisis of change, communication takes the form of negotiations to solve the conflicts between employers and unions (between the management and employees). As the factors that triggered the communication crisis are numerous, just as surprising and complex can communication itself become. Its evolution towards the climax can be slow, under the conditions it is marked by the market success of organisation's products, services or by the image promoted by leaders. There are also situations where the evolution of the communication crisis can be sudden and devastating; this happens when inside or outside the organisation (between the organisation and the extra-organisational environment), contradictions and differences occur, which degenerate into conflicts.

03. The communication crisis can manifest locally, at the level of an organisational structure or between two levels of an organisation, without getting a general character. Once installed in the whole organisation, the internal communication crisis can cause the occurrence and development of an external communication crisis. The reverse of the situation is also possible, meaning a crisis in the external communication leads to a communication crisis in an organisation.

At the level of development registered by the current organisational structures, the communication crises are many times unavoidable and result in a series of effects that change the position of the organisation on the market and can affect its image. It is known that in order to resist in the environment of competition, in order to be credible, an organisation must take care of its own image. This is created with difficulty and maintained by observing high standards. When it develops by themselves,

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communication crises may cause organisational disturbances, and what is even more severe is that they can have undesirable effects on the organisation's image.

A first change the communication crisis triggers refers to ***reducing the efficiency of communication*** inside the organisation; due to the uncontrolled development of some channels parallel to the official ones and due to the amplification of redundant messages, as well as of rumours, the members of the organisation can no longer communicate optimally. Also, leaders are no longer recognised as credible sources of information, their place being taken by informal sources from inside or outside the organisation. Thus, there appears a filter between the management and lower structure, which blocks, distorts or delays even the administrative-type communication (decision-reporting). The organisation can no longer be managed and enters a managerial crisis.

Moreover, ***the communication crisis affects the symbolic structure of the organisation***, a situation that leads to the emergence of communicative and social conflicts. In an organisation under communication crisis, the hierarchy, observance of power distinctions are no longer recognised, and the emotional way of expression replaces the rational one. The released energies give rise to some confrontations and reports of unpredictable forces, and conflicts deepen. Deep ruptures occur, the effects of which accumulate and move from institutional to organisational, then to the groups inside the organisation. These are moments of tension, because the unity of the group members disappears also in the face of danger; a situation of confusion is installed that annihilates any effort of lucidity and differentiation. The perception of crisis is marked by a radical and sudden inversion of a normal state of continuous balance. All the characteristics of the normal, such as: feelings of calm, security and communicational sharing, the capacity to make projects to differentiate, negotiate the conflicts in a spirit that does not shake the sense of security at the level of groups or individuals, the positive representation of the others, of the unit of the project, of the constructive

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imagery, compatible with the organisation's origins and objectives, having the adhesion of the members, can be found by designing the contrary elements: restlessness, insecurity, isolation, incapacity of design, refusal to negotiate, structuring the negative representations about the others and about the organisation's perspectives. At these moments, the communication crisis becomes synonymous with the conflict. And, as it is known, once triggered, the conflict is self-powered until one of the parties is defeated, gives in or mediation intervenes. The one directly affected now is the individual who observes their values have been violated and will become defensive. Defence may include two stages: the former includes the tendency of self-depreciation and withdrawal from the opponent; the second stage follows, supported by the depreciative assessment of the other and by exerting the pressures, communicative and psychological attacks on the opponent. At the level of organisations and social groups, it can degenerate into an open conflict such as strikes, demonstrations and violent confrontations.

04. The idea we want to emphasise is that in most cases, ***the communication crisis generates the image crisis of the organisation.*** Once triggered, internal communicative conflicts affect the identity of the organisation, the mechanism of training and promoting the self-image being thus interrupted. By interrupting the flow of information or distorting the functional and deliberate messages the organisation transmits to the external environment, the credibility of its actions is reduced. The quotas of trust, notoriety and legitimacy of the organisation decline, giving rise to the premises of producing the image crisis. Under these conditions, the organisation cannot function normally, its public image leads to major disturbances in all scopes of activity. It is a difficult time, which requires the reconfiguration of the organisation's social image through an act of imaginative rollover. A new communicative identity can also be created.

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Not even the *external environment* will not be protected by the communication crisis. As a roller, other organisations can be involved in the communication crisis too, depending on their degree of dependence against the organisation generating the crisis. It is a common situation in the companies that have more than one company under their subordination; their operation depends on the decision-making and communication capacity of the powerful company. The stronger the hierarchical connections are, the stronger is the influence of the crisis. The autonomous administrations would be classified in this category (black coal, lignite, gas, oil, forests); banks with their territorial branches; political parties with local branches.

05. Seen as an important time in an organisation's life, the communication crisis can have the most varied effects, which can change the image of the organisation, among others. Only its members can overcome the difficult stages, can manage the crisis by **creating the structures and mechanisms dedicated to the development of organisational communication. These elements are related to** public relations, the role of which is to develop the internal and external communication, by specific forms of gaining the public trust, sympathy and support.

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