

# MANAGEMENT OF COMMUNICATION PROCESSES IN CRISIS SITUATIONS

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## Abstract

Effective communication and good communication skills are indispensable factors of success in all interpersonal social, political and business relationships, and their importance is particularly manifested in various types of crisis situations. The perception of how complex and dangerous a particular crisis may be, and the trust placed in those responsible for its resolution, will largely depend on their communication skills and the manner in which the communication process is managed during the crisis. Various types of crisis situations require specific ways to communicate and different communication strategies, so the communication process needs to be managed.

The purpose of this paper is to describe the role of communication skills and to emphasize the importance of managing the communication process in order to avoid or at least minimize obstacles in communicating with target audiences in crisis situations.

**Keywords:** communication skills, strategy, management, crisis situations

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Efficient communication and good communication skills are important factors of success in all interpersonal social, political and business relations. Although many believe they know how to communicate by the very fact they do communicate, communication is a very complex process requiring careful practice, planning and continuous improvement. To put it simply, communication is the exchange of information, ideas and feelings using verbal and non-verbal means, adapted to the situational context, or the social environment of the communication process (Fox, 2006).

It is a process that implies the existence of the need for communication, the setting of communicative goals and the transfer of messages. It needs to be managed in order to achieve the optimal results.

As an important factor for the success of all interpersonal relationships, communication plays a crucial role in the creation of favorable or unfavorable impressions of individuals, organizations (Fox, 2006:13), but also situations. This particularly applies to various types of crisis situations that require

specific ways of communicating and the use of different communicative strategies.

Although authors from the field of crisis management disagree on the unambiguous definition of the concept of a crisis, crisis situations can be defined as situations in which there is a risk of escalation in intensity, risk of thorough scrutiny by the media or the government, interference with normal business operations, jeopardizing the positive image of the company or its leadership and the damage to the foundations of a business organization in any way (Fink, 2002:15-16).

Public perception of the complexity and dangerousness of a crisis situation, as well as trust in the stakeholders responsible for resolving such crises, will largely depend on their communication skills and the way of managing the communication process during this period.

Like all other types of skills, communication skills need to be continuously and systematically developed and improved. Having good communication skills actually means knowing how to formulate a

message in the context of a communication process and how to transmit this message to those for whom it is intended with as little communication noise as possible, or anything that could influence the understanding of the message in any way.

In this regard, the purpose of this paper is to describe the role of communication skills and the importance of managing the communication process in crisis situations in order to avoid or minimize obstacles in the communication with the target audience.

## **2. THE CRISIS MANAGEMENT PROCESS AND THE COMMUNICATION PROCESS**

Crisis situations differ according to their duration, content and consequences, but they all share certain common properties.

Osmanagić Bedenik (2003) interpreted Wiener and Kahn who point out twelve properties as features of a crisis. According to them, a crisis is the tipping point in the developmental sequence of events and activities that creates a situation involving high urgency of action and which represents danger for the goals and values. Furthermore, it arises from the sequence of events that result in the emergence of new conditions that subsequently cause important consequences for the future. It creates uncertainty in the assessment of the situation and the mastering of necessary development of alternatives, reduces control over the events and their effects, increases urgency, stress and fear, raises time pressure and tension, changes the relationships between the members and available information is usually insufficient.

Regardless of whether the crisis situations are the result of natural forces and other external factors or their causes are exclusively related to the intentional or accidental human actions arising out of their ignorance or inattention, crises give rise to uncertainty and require rapid response from all stakeholders involved, as well as effective communication with all target groups within the general public.

Target groups within the general public differ ac-

ording to their characteristics and interests. In order for the communication during a crisis to be effective, there need to be clearly formulated objectives and ways of communicating for each target group. Messages referred to them must be consistent, tailored to their interests and transmitted through appropriate media.

Crisis management process encompasses a wide range of crisis-oriented activities which can be represented through the phases of anticipative or preventive crisis management, the phase of crisis identification, the phase of reactive management, i. e. taking control over a crisis and the phase of learning lessons from a crisis.

Management of the communication process is crucial in all phases of crisis management since each and every one of them has its own specificities. In the pre-crisis period, crisis communication focuses on the identification and reduction of risk, forming a crisis communication team, preparation of crisis communication plans and the training of spokespersons, as well as the determining of target groups within the general public.

Communication during a crisis will greatly affect the crisis outcomes and the future reputation of the organizations and actors of crisis communication, while the post-crisis period involves the re-examination of how successful the communication had been and the incorporation of newly-acquired experience in the future activities.

From the above, a conclusion may be drawn that the processes of managing crises and managing communication processes are parallel to each other; and that those processes may complement and support one another, but also complicate matters if communication during a crisis is not maintained in the proper way (Kešetović & Toth, 2012).

## **3. COMMUNICATION PROCESS MANAGEMENT IN CRISIS SITUATIONS**

In the communication process, various communicative patterns occur that reveal the content we want to communicate. However, at the same time the communicators say a lot about themselves,

their own characteristics, moods, recipients of their message and their relationship towards them. They lead to successful or unsuccessful communication (Leinert Novosel, 2012:19).

Crisis situations require efficient management of the communication process in order to prevent information gaps, the occurrence of rumors or a distorted representation of the event. In addition, communication process management will affect the public perception regarding a particular crisis situation, it can contribute to the development of trust towards those responsible for resolving the crisis and thus influence the way the crisis will be resolved.

Communication is the essence of crisis management and it is important for each phase of the crisis management process (Coombs, 2010). Crisis communication can be viewed as information and as a strategy, whereby crisis communication in terms of information refers to the need to collect, analyze and send information, as well as facilitate decision-making about the activities to be performed. On the other hand, consideration of crisis management as a strategy refers to the use of messages to improve the relations with the stakeholders and to influence their perception of the crisis (Kešetović & Toth, 2012).

There are several different classifications of crisis communication strategies. One of them involves classifying the communication strategies into defensive and offensive.

A defensive communication strategy means partial reporting within and outside the organization, concealment or even denial that a crisis has occurred. It is often called the policy of concealment and cover-ups.

An offensive communication strategy means complete, honest and timely informing of the public, which prevents the occurrence of rumors, avoids uncertainty and the loss of trust (Osmanagić Beđenik, N. 2003).

According to another type of classification, there are seven groups of reactive communication strategies, which include several practical strategies.

The strategy of preventive activity is employed prior to being attacked by critics and is based on the

publication of one's own version of events or the justification for particular accusations before the other party discloses them.

Offensive response strategies are based on acting from the standpoint of advantage and power in relation to a crisis or opposition (Jugo, 2017:205), and they involve using the strategies of attack, inconvenience, shock and threats.

Strategies of denial, excuses and justifications belong to the defensive response strategy which denies, diminishes or accepts guilt and responsibility for a crisis situation.

The group of misleading response strategies includes the strategy of strategic concessions, the strategy of allusions, strategy of dissolution and renaming strategy. The strategy of expressing concern, compassion, regret and apologies belong to the strategies of public sympathy. The strategy of corrective behavior combines a group of strategies by which the organizations attempt to reduce or repair the damage they have caused to the target groups within the general public. In this category we include the strategy of initiating investigation proceedings, the strategy of corrective action, the strategy of restoring the original state of affairs and the strategy of complete repentance. The group of strategies involving the so-called deliberate inactivity involves the deliberate failure to take any action and consists of strategic silence and strategic ambiguity (Jugo, 2017).

Each of these strategies requires a specific form of communication process management and the communicators who possess communication skills suited to the implementation of the chosen communication strategy. The most important communication skills are shown below.

#### **4. IMPLEMENTATION OF COMMUNICATION SKILLS IN CRISIS SITUATIONS**

Successful communication will be the one dominated by the positive feeling gained by the recipient about the sender, the communication situation and its content (Leinert Novosel, 2012:36). Therefore,

it may be rightly concluded that communication skills are important in all segments of interacting with others. They involve a range of activities which contribute to the successful performance of the communication process. They imply clear and concise formulation and transmission of thoughts, feelings and messages to others by using various means of communication, overcoming obstacles in the communication process, coordinated and appropriate non-verbal communication, efficient use of the voice and the selection of an appropriate strategy to realize the set communication goals. Their contribution to the success of the communication process is especially pronounced in crisis situations. In such circumstances, the success of the communication process can become the determinant between the success and failure in dealing with a crisis. Verbal and non-verbal elements of the communicators, their linguistic and oratory skills, goodwill, empathy, assertiveness and consistency are an important factor in the impression of professionalism left by the stakeholders responsible for resolving a particular crisis on others during this period; thereby determining the nature of the relationship and the degree of trust between all stakeholders and target groups among the general public.

Trust is a key element of all interpersonal relationships, and some studies show that trust is actually the result of the correlation between three variables: information, social impact and control (Fox, 2006: 95). It is difficult to gain trust, but it can be lost quite easily and rapidly.

In crisis situations, it is of crucial importance that the members of all target groups among the general public have trust in the intellectual and professional abilities of the entities responsible for resolving the crisis, as well as their moral qualities.

Any misuse or manipulation of key information will affect the credibility of the communicator, and thus the success of the communication process.

In this regard, successful communication can be based on several key rules of good communication likewise applicable to crises:

It is necessary to emphasize the importance of the recipient, create a positive attitude and mood in the recipient.

Recipients need to be valued, that is, shown that they are important partners in communication.

They need to be given a role in communication and the events in general.

It is necessary to mobilize the recipient or arouse interest in the issues we are trying to communicate.

It is necessary to make an effort to create a dynamic and convincing communication and to ensure maximum involvement in the communication.

It is necessary to emphasize clarity, simplicity and order in communication.

Defensiveness, moderation and absence of any pressure or attack disarms and creates a winning formula for communication (Leinert Novosel, 2012: 55).

Communication in crises must be clear, situation-appropriate and understandable to target groups. Danger of a misunderstanding increases with the complexity of the social environment and the intensity of the emotional charge (Fox, 2006:35), what is characteristic for crisis situations.

Therefore, by appropriately using communication skills, the entities responsible for resolving crises can avoid or minimize potential obstacles in the communication process resulting from various external factors, lack of knowledge or inappropriate use of language, disparity between the verbal and non-verbal aspect of the message, mood and emotional charge in the communication space, differences in values and culture and all other types of physical, physiological or semantic obstacles which may arise in the communication process.

## 5. CONCLUSION

Crisis situations are situations which require rapid response and high-quality communication with all target groups within the general public before, during and after a crisis. Communication process management is invaluable in such moments, since each crisis situation is specific and requires the choice of appropriate communication strategies,

whereby the communication skills of crisis actors are of particular importance. They are expected to adapt their verbal and non-verbal communication to the specific features of the situation at hand, show empathy and interest in the needs of the stakeholders, adjust their style of communication and try to establish a relationship based on cooperation and trust. This only confirms the necessity of communication process management in crisis situations and the need for a continuous and systematic improvement of basic communication skills, with the purpose of successfully responding to all challenges arising from various crises, minimizing communicative obstacles and successfully communicating with various target groups within the general public.

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## UPRAVLJANJE KOMUNIKACIJSKIM PROCESOM U KRIZNIM SITUACIJAMA

### Sažetak:

Učinkovita komunikacija i dobre komunikacijske vještine neizostavni su čimbenici uspjeha u svim međuljudskim društvenim, političkim i poslovnim odnosima, a njihova važnost posebno dolazi do izražaja u različitim vrstama kriznih situacija. Percepcija složenosti i opasnosti neke krizne situacije i povjerenje u nosioce rješavanja tih kriza uvelike će ovisiti o njihovim komunikacijskim vještinama i načinu upravljanja komunikacijskim procesom tijekom tog razdoblja. Različite vrste kriznih situacija zahtijevaju specifične načine komuniciranja i različite komunikacijske strategije pa je komunikacijskim procesom nužno upravljati. Namjera je ovog rada opisati ulogu komunikacijskih vještina te istaknuti važnost upravljanja komunikacijskim procesom kako bi se izbjegle ili barem minimalizirale prepreke u komunikaciji s ciljnim javnostima u kriznim situacijama.

**Ključne riječi:** komunikacijske vještine, strategija, upravljanje, krizne situacije