



Crisis Management's Six Principles¹

In this note we shall be looking into the principles that provide meaning and sense to crisis management's best practices. Understanding them will also help one to be — and not only to perform — a good crisis manager.

1. ADDRESS PERCEPTIONS, NOT ONLY FACTS

To properly understand a crisis, the most critical perspective is to *accept the public's point of view*. By doing so — and only by doing so — you will be able to properly evaluate the facts. The facts alone are relatively important, but the manner in which your stakeholders perceive these facts is even more so. With this in mind, a time of crises often necessitates that greater weight be given to the stakeholders' perception than to the actual facts themselves. It is often the public perception that causes the crisis.

This does not mean that a crisis is a completely subjective event. A true crisis is triggered by some concrete fact that leads to the ensuing public uproar. Here I would like to stress that the perceptions themselves should be considered as hard facts, in the same manner as all other physical, tangible and measurable facts. The term "fact" includes both the material and the sociological events, in which the context plays a major role.

By applying this approach, you will avoid making the common mistake of assessing that the facts are favorable for your institution, and thus conclude that it is not necessary to communicate with all of the publics, nor address the false facts as baseless accusations. When, in reality, by failing to communicate you may actually trigger a real crisis. This situation tends to arise in crises in which one party is somehow perceived to be at odds with the public's general will and/or opinion and when another player aims to strengthen his/her own political, economic or ideological standing by publicly condemning the institution in crisis.

Whether it is accurate or not, the public's perception is its reality. If the public believes a risk exists, it can be expected to act according to that belief. If the public believes that a crisis is severe, it is also important to acknowledge this belief and respond accordingly, recommends Seeger. In addition, Lukaszewski has even dared to break it down into percentages, and in what he calls the *mathematics of reality*, 15% corresponds to the basic facts and data, and 85% to raw emotions and perceptions.

In this sense, *the severity of a crisis is directly proportional to its public perception*. Public opinion is formed by perception, not reality. Regardless of what is really happening internally, the way the public perceives a situation becomes the reality; a company has to address it.

There are cases in which the stakeholders may not take a highly grave fact seriously, as it has not been perceived as such. Conversely, something of a much lesser impact may explode into a full-blown crisis, if — rightly or wrongly — it is so perceived by the public. For instance, if a

¹ Abridged version of Yago de la Cierva (2021), *Leading Companies through storms and crises*, EUNSA, chapter No. 3.

tax inspector, a journalist or a stock market analyst sees some fishy accounting in an institution's books, their management cannot fail to respond immediately even though any unlawful act is far from being proven. It would be totally unacceptable to stand back and watch when such an abnormality occurs, even though the institution may feel it is unsubstantiated. The problem is real from the very instant in which people consider that it is real regardless of its true impact before that point.

Bear in mind that a crisis implies significant uncertainty regarding the future. Your stakeholders wish to know what is going on and why it is happening, yet they are just as eager to find out whether it may happen again, in that same institution or in any other within that same sector. It is in this direction that a solution must be designed and applied, easing people's fears and expectations. In fact, the public will not be able to move ahead and finalize their perception regarding the crisis until they feel reasonably sure that this troubling episode will not repeat itself in the foreseeable future. Only then will people be able to get this incident out of their mind, and consider forgiving those they blame for the crisis.

Perceptions are also important because **the notion of risk is closely related to the feeling of uncertainty**. The perception of risk as perceived by the public is subjective in nature. It depends on a wide array of factors: age (younger people see themselves beyond any danger), intellectual level (generally speaking, the higher the intellectual level is, the more likely people are to reject superstitions) and gender (scientific research has shown that males tend to have a lower perception of risks than females). In addition, the frequency of the risk itself and the sensation that it is voluntary or controlled have a subjective impact.

There must be harmony between the corporate response and the public perception, but this is often complicated by the organizations' natural tendency to assess risks based upon their own objective and/or even scientific criteria. It is much easier for organizations to rationalize processes and focus entirely on their standard set of measurable statistics and indicators, than to consider all the varied appraisals, which change from one person to the next. In fact, most risk reports tend to be based upon measurable facts rather than anything tied to perceptions at all.

Nonetheless, generations of catastrophes caused by human calculation and error have dampened a once-hearty trust in science to forecast and solve problems. Nobody, neither our employees, our local communities, our clients nor the media, address any crisis based upon objective scientific criteria. Thus, the scientific risk assessment should always be measured from a human judgment angle.

Accepting uncertainty and ambiguity is one of the best practices in crisis management and communication. Inevitably, one should accept the fact that critical situations are full of uncertainty and confusion. Companies should follow Seeger's advice:

Crises and disasters are, by definition, abnormal, dynamic, and unpredictable events. Crisis spokespersons, however, often feel a need to be overly certain and overly reassuring. This may be largely a consequence of a belief that the public cannot accept uncertainty situations and needs certainty in the face of a crisis, even when information is simply unavailable. However, overly reassuring statements in the face of an inherently uncertain and equivocal situation may reduce a spokesperson's credibility. This is particularly the case as a crisis evolves in an unexpected, unpredictable way. In addition, over-reassuring statements that lack credibility may even create higher levels of alarm.

Therefore, forthrightness in dealing with the public implies explaining the facts as they really and truly are. A best practice of crisis communication, then, is to acknowledge the uncertainty inherent in the situation with statements such as, "The situation is fluid," and, "We do not yet have all of the facts." This lack of assertiveness allows the communicator to refine the message

as more information becomes available and avoids statements that are likely to be proven inaccurate as more information becomes available.

Ambiguity is unethical if it poses alternative interpretations using biased or incomplete information that aims to deceive. If the situation is indeed muddled, it is far from honest to proclaim clear statements when there is really nothing clear whatsoever.

2. LISTEN TO PROTESTERS

One of the most surprising aspects within the scope of crisis management is finding yourself unexpectedly in front of an ugly crowd. Why are these people so upset? Why are these reporters asking personally insulting questions? Why are our employees attacking us this way? Why are the posts in social media so aggressively against us? These are bewildering experiences, especially when we haven't done anything wrong or maybe it is only the first time we've done something wrong. Understanding how to handle yourself in front of a group of people who are fiercely against you is one of the most necessary steps to be able to communicate effectively during a crisis.

Please bear in mind that the public in general may not be willing to favor our institutions. Even if it is the very first time that our organization has made a mistake, we must realize that the public has most likely suffered negative consequences of similar mistakes being made by other within our own sector. The public has every reason to be upset. Corporations, companies and both local and national authorities have tried to cover up mistakes, have kept all the potential risks under cover, have misled and even brazenly lied to them. Therefore, people feel that they have had the wool pulled over their eyes more than once and are simply not ready to trust anyone anymore. No wonder why the Edelman's trust barometer gives worse ratios every year.

Even if most companies clearly state their commitment to serve their employees, clients shareholders and local communities, and want to establish a win-win relation for both parties, when something bad happens many of them do exactly the opposite. They tend to use "dead silence", hiding any evidence, launching smoke screens and thinly-veiled threats of ceasing sponsorship or advertising on particular media, and other initiatives they have in their bag of dirty tricks.

These tactics are based upon a wide variety of approaches and reasons: remaining silent because their lawyers have recommended to do so; pretending that nothing has happened or that there is no reason to be so upset; trying to retain or destroy information (ignoring that sooner or later the truth is going to come out anyway); presenting their own stance as a scientific or independent fact, perhaps even by having it certified by some imaginary organization; stating simply that they have nothing to do with the issue, or blaming it on someone else — maybe a recently fired employee is made out to be the scapegoat, or an innocent third party.

Even more drastically, organizations sometimes react by creating authentic media wars using anything and everything in their power to distract people's attention, to either silence reporters or to usher them onto a bandwagon, thinking that the "fan effect" will work: if everyone is involved, none is guilty. These sad, yet frequent, cases of abuse obviously explain why none of us trusts institutions anymore.

The sole alternative to these tactics requires, to start with, *a thorough understanding of why a public is upset*. Knowing, not "judging", is the first step to forming the most suitable response.

In these kinds of situations, one can find himself witness to true ire. Webster's Dictionary defines ire, as "very violent anger in which one loses self-control and commits violence, be it verbal or physical in nature." If someone is out of his mind it is better to know that before you

start arguing with that person, because he or she is certainly not going to calmly defend his or her own position, but rather will react angrily, actually even hurting his own stance. Nothing is more dangerous than an angry opponent is because his or her ire makes him or her unpredictable.

In all reality ire is a self-defense response to pain or the threat of pain that one is feeling, even when the threat may simply be perceived rather than real. In dealing with these situations, the distinction between rational and irrational ire is irrelevant. First, those who are extremely angry feel their fierce attitude is reasonable, and their anger is likely to intensify if others react to their outrage as though they are irrational. Second, one must not entertain the feeling that the person who is so angry lacks either information or intelligence. This assumption will prevent us from looking at the real causes of that person's anger. It is much easier to blame the anger on the person rather than investigate any rational basis for his seemingly irrational behavior. Additionally, identifying the source of the anger may help to discover why they are using their aggressiveness as a strategy to try to intimidate their opponent.

If one party fails to make an effort to understand the other, they are more likely to adopt an adversarial stance, and thus, they will find it much harder to identify the common interests that may be used as the jumping-off point for an eventual agreement. Unfortunately, say Susskind and Field, "when the lack of a conciliatory spirit prevails, even the search for a dialogue or the proposal of alternative solutions to the absolute annihilation of our adversary are deemed as being treason." In such circumstances, a spiral of ire is created and its very first victim is the truth itself, regardless of who is right or wrong.

Thus, the angrier the public is the greater the effort we must make to really listen to them. These people have suffered the aggression directly either by losing equity or by being threatened and they need to vent strong feelings before they are ready to listen. When people are upset, they have a passion to be heard. "Having something to say" is a single-minded state that focuses all of one's energy and attention. It may seem counterintuitive but a person who knows how to listen is, in a sense, a good conversationalist because listening closely is an effective way to be listened to. Only once the publics have been listened to will they hear the institution's side of the argument.

3. CONNECT EMOTIONALLY

In the same line as acting aligned with the public perception is to be able to give the proper weight to the world of emotions. Crises, as seen from the angle of those who are suffering the consequences, are highly emotional situations due to the inherent risks involved and the lack of time to solve the problem that tends to happen and hence uncontrolled behavior tends to take place both within and beyond the organization.

The institutional response in a crisis should not be limited to simply publishing the cold facts, with no emotional commitment whatsoever, but rather it should show signs of sensitivity, understanding, humanity and real feelings. In a nutshell, you should show the facts as closely as possible to the way in which the average person would describe them. There are intellectual subjects and emotional ones and each one should be dealt with separately. When one is speaking about a subject that triggers passion from the distance his thoughts become less relevant. Ailes suggests we bear in mind "that the facts provide information but emotions provide the right interpretation."

It is impossible to overstate the importance of communicating with compassion and empathy in crises that have hurt people. This is the recommendation of James Lee Witt, director of the Federal Emergency Management Agency (USA):

You can empathize with their pain and embarrassment at being helpless. You can make adjustments to the recovery process based on their need for dignity. You can make sure they have shelter and a hot meal. You can listen to their stories and acknowledge their concerns. You can hug them and let them cry on your shoulder. You can say to them as I do, “we will never be able to bring back your memories, but we can help you build new ones”.

Communication is a relation that is established among people, not some sort of anonymous mechanism used to spread ideas. As Mora stated, our society is overpopulated with broken hearts and perplexing intelligences. We must approach physical and moral pain with extreme care. Empathy does not imply renouncing our own convictions but rather putting ourselves in the other person’s shoes. In today’s society, those responses based upon feelings and humanity are the most compelling.

If empathy must be developed in those cases in which the institution has done nothing wrong, it is even truer in those cases when there are actual responsibilities. True feelings are required to be able to effectively communicate in situations in which people have been hurt.

Social media are an effective thermometer in measuring public emotions. Many times, online reactions are superficial and rash and I agree that they should be taken with slightly more than a pinch of salt and no one should react too rashly based on what they just read on some blog. Yet the danger that they represent for major institutions is most likely the contrary. Many institutions in a time of crisis simply ignore them as too superficial to deserve any credit or attention whatsoever. In my book, that is a big mistake.

We also should be taking into account the vast gap between people in one age bracket and another. Younger generations are less likely to be convinced with rational arguments: their own personal experiences and their friends are the main stepping-stones that make up what they perceive as being their values. Common sense has changed and to be able to even start to get through to this generation you have to use completely different pitches that both begin and end with emotions.

For older people, especially for those who have developed their own personalities in an environment based upon austerity, personal effort and meritocracy, this concept may simply sound like pure sentimentalism, and behaving in this way means treating people as if they were mere teenagers. The problem is that our new generations have developed their own personality based on another set of parameters and it should not be assumed that they would automatically control their emotions. Moreover, self-control is no longer considered a plus, and the socially predominant theory nowadays is that perhaps controlling your emotions is not perceived as being an upside. Younger people seem to think that letting your emotions control you is the best approach. One wonders if Oscar Wilde would be shocked to learn that his famous comment that “the best way to avoid temptation is to fall for it,” is no longer a funny line but rather a common practice.

In this sense, institutional responses should avoid any inkling of looking down on others, or showing signs of excessive self-confidence. The institution should never forget that they are always one of the main suspects in a crisis and are the ones who have to win the affect and trust of all publics. Ogrizek & Guillery underline that those who have experienced several crises know that modesty is needed more than anything else.

Reacting with compassion, concern and empathy with all of the stakeholders is one of the primary best practices in crisis management and communication. Sociological research shows that people react positively to the spokesperson who recognizes the concerns and shows human compassion when faced with damage that may have happened and thus strengthens his/her credibility and the perception of legitimacy both before, during and after the incident. “Some crisis spokespersons — comments Seeger — may be reluctant, however, to frame their

statements with expressions of concern and empathy for fear of appearing unprofessional. These efforts to maintain professionalism are often perceived by the public to be cold and uncaring. The resulting perception may undermine the message and credibility of the messenger.”

Public opinion, emotions and feelings are of capital importance in a crisis. A cold and apathetic response to what is perceived as being a human problem will only end up with the institution being considered Public Enemy Number One. As Cohn stated, “the public understands that problems or accidents can happen, but what they won’t accept is the semblance of insensitivity on the part of their leaders.”

That is why it is so critical to use a more moderate tone and softer expressions. There are some words that in themselves sound like a slap in the face and others that come across like a pat on the back — words may either be harmful or medicine that cures wounds. Uncertainty about how a crisis is going to develop tends to trigger tensions, which often lead to disproportionate reactions. Lukaszewski explained it quite well: “keep your testosterone under control because the minimum amount of negative energy that you let go of, will boomerang by at least 5 or 10-fold.”

Therefore, the corporate response has to express vividly how calm they are feeling. Nobody should ever insult anyone else nor respond to any insults that they may have heard. The emotional tuning and moderate language are critical and should be carefully chosen so as to properly convey your message. The tone of a response is an integral part of the message itself.

Acting this way is never easy. In public debates about ideological subjects, it is quite common to hear one person insulting another. For instance, the suffix “phobic” (e.g., homophobic or islamophobic) is an easy way to disqualify your opponent as irrational with a minimum mental effort. Being aware of such manipulative tactics beforehand will help you handle such an accusation, take a deep breath and respond calmly, even when your opponent is insulting you. The right tone in your message must come along with a polite presentation.

Bear in mind that in communication the non-verbal element is just as important as the verbal. Even more, according to many experts, verbal elements represent a mere 7% of the whole communication process while the other 93% depend entirely on other aspects beyond the words themselves. 38% on the paralinguistic aspects (the tone, sound of your voice, the pace) and 55% on your body language (facial expression, gestures, visual contact, and your way of moving). Therefore, the way you present yourself, your personal style and the way you treat others is extremely important.

It is even more necessary to be humble when the parties in conflict are a major institution against one single person or very small group, as has been seen so often the case, when the general public automatically takes the side of the weakest. The bigger the organization, the more important it will be for it to demonstrate humility and humanity.

4. TALK FROM THE POINT OF VIEW OF YOUR STAKEHOLDERS

A corporate response should strike the right emotional tone, but let’s not exaggerate. You should behave with feelings, but you should not decide based on feelings. Your decisions and your communication should be rational.

Reasoning must be used and must be used frequently. Crises and controversies trigger outright rejection of the other party’s proposals and ideas and become prejudices and stereotypes. In order to not fall into this emotional trap, you must make a major additional effort to ensure that the voice of reason is being heard. The insistence of paying excessive attention to public perceptions, understanding why they are angry and talking with the

proper emotional tone is the right way to ensure the right procedure elements are in place to create the best environment for rational thinking.

In addition, take into account that emotions themselves are not only problematic for those on the outside, but for those on the inside as well. For instance, if a manager is being heavily criticized on a daily basis by the local press, even though he or she may, in fact, be a calm natured person, eventually this barrage of emotions will affect his or her behavior and even his or her own advisors will be acting under this pressure. Elizalde recommends that we use an external consultant who is not going to be affected by this type of emotional pressure during our crisis.

The fact is that excessive noise and overall confusion in a crisis environment is a major obstacle that many times makes flowing communication practically impossible. Controversies create confusion in contents, tend to deform the message itself, lead the way to exaggeration that spread around quite easily. This confusion is greatly multiplied in time of crises as risks are perceived as being imminent and the time factor is so critical that people tend to act first and think later.

To overcome this reigning confusion, firstly, we need clarity in our contents, meaning clear and easy to understand messages for all. Questions that the publics are raising should be clearly addressed, putting ourselves in their shoes, thinking deeply about their ideas and weighing them properly and then expressing them as simply as possible.

The perverse effects of scientific terminology (medical, biological, legal, etc.) must be avoided at the time that you are communicating the inherent risk or trying to explain rather complex realities. Obviously, institutions are simply trying to provide precise, detailed and unmistakable information yet people tend to get lost when terms that they do not understand are being used.

At the end of the day, what ends up happening is exactly the opposite of what the institution was aiming to accomplish. People reach the erroneous conclusion that the institution is trying to hide something underneath all of this technical jargon that they are unable to understand.

So, in times of crisis every effort must be made to ensure clarity and use the same language as the average person. When it is absolutely necessary to use technical terms, they should immediately be explained in such a manner that anybody is able to understand them. Misunderstandings are the root of all communication evil.

A very effective speaking style is one that uses images. Visual information tends to make any normal person understand complex information and estimates by using comparisons with units of measure that they are already familiar with.

Secondly, the subjects involved should be addressed in a positive manner. Our own opinions should be presented in an affirmative way without taking for granted that everybody will know our stances even before we open our mouth. On the other hand, if we treat the audience as if they are more intelligent than they may appear to be and know less than we think they will (although more than a few tend to apply the opposite strategy) we will obtain good results.

Thirdly, giving the proper importance to the public's perception also requires that the institution's response will have to be able to adopt that group's perspective. It must be relevant: in other words, talking about what people are really worried about, is meaningful to our listeners and not simply meaningful for us.

Thus, the institution should clearly show its concern is not aimed at defending its own interest but rather the interest of those people it is serving. The public should be able to understand that the institution is seeking the overall good of the people and that it feels responsible to society in general and, above all, that it has a soul.

5. BEHOLD THE COURT OF PUBLIC OPINION

An organization's activity is being scrutinized by two different courts: public opinion and the law. Each one has its own sets of rules, procedures, pace and sanctions. In addition, of course, top management needs to receive advice in both rings. It needs lawyers and it needs communicators.

Allow me to insist on the latter, because the former can be taken for granted. Neither serious companies nor their executives, when accused of any wrongdoing, will move an eyebrow without the assistance of a good lawyer. The real risk is to follow his or her recommendations before even listening too to a communicator about the possible consequences of all options on public opinion. Both types of advice have different content and vision, yet their perspectives are complementary.

What members of the steering committee need to realize is that quite often while we might have the legal right to do something, it would not be in our best interest to do it. Corporations and people's lives show many times that *you may have the right but not be right*, and we could end — as McCann titles his book — *Winning the Legal Battle, Losing the Public War*.

Public opinion — the opinion of our stakeholders — is being governed much more by natural ethical criteria rather than legal norms. Legality and socially responsible behavior are not synonyms. Some actions may be legally acceptable yet socially unacceptable and thus a lawyer's *modus operandi* should not be the only basis for establishing the corporate response to a problem. Managers should make their decisions bearing in mind what is both socially and ethically acceptable. Overlooking this may lead to very unpleasant surprises indeed. For instance, public opinion considers that suppliers' mistakes are also the responsibility of their providers.

This contradiction between the law and social consensus pops up quite often: for instance, when the law allows a person or an institution to behave in a certain manner, yet public opinion deems that behavior to be anti-social. The law and public opinion (or in its ultimate extreme, social ethics) are completely different scopes and impose very different obligations. Another example is when a company applies rules not in-synch with the values of the present, without realizing times have changed.

"The law is equal for all" is a nearly universally accepted basic legal premise, yet not all of us are equal in accordance with public opinion. The specific situation of each individual plays a major role in a concrete crisis. The rich and powerful will always be perceived as being wrong and the weaker party will be heavily favored, even in those cases where the law favors the rich and powerful, as has been proven repeatedly in crisis. In fact, the public tends to identify the rich and powerful as being the bad guys. As Seymour & Moore wrote, "it appears that there is a natural tendency to think that everybody who has become rich have had to sell their souls to the devil."

Another version of "good guy vs bad guy" is "big guy vs little guy". Big corporations are not especially loved today, and people tend to link large companies with the bad guys. The myth of David and Goliath shows us that the larger organizations are always wrong and that the smaller individual who challenges this larger organization is always right.

This predisposition against "the powerful" is seen as well in things that are perfectly legitimate for an individual yet are perceived as being unacceptable for a large organization.

This dichotomy between lawyers' advice and communicators' advice happens both ways. Sometimes a communicator as the most appropriate suggests an action plan, because they are in accord with the stakeholders' perceptions, yet it may have serious negative legal consequences due to the major legal responsibilities incurred. On the other hand, it is also possible that the most appropriate actions from a legal angle will have devastating effects on

public opinion. These conflicts appear quite often, for instance when illicit behavior that is generating social alarm is being punished: public opinion will demand a harsher sentence than that which is required by law.

Even more, in many cases indeed the advice from the communicator is more relevant than legal recommendations, because of how the court of public opinion operates. It is fast, justice on the spot: judges and juries wait to have all of the elements at their disposition before reaching their conclusions, but people jump to conclusions right away. Additionally, the concept of “innocent until proven guilty” is valid for judges and juries, but not for people: anyone who is accused by the media is immediately declared guilty until proven otherwise. Lastly, the punishment of public opinion may be much more severe than the imprisonment or some economic sanction imposed: destroying one’s reputation or full-scale social discredit may last longer and have a more devastating effect than any jail time.

We should not be surprised that in specific cases the institutional communication manager and the legal affairs director seem to be on opposite sides of the fence. If for instance, the corporate CEO has been accused of tax fraud, the former would automatically propose calling a press conference while their lawyer will probably tell them to remain silent as, at least in the United States, among lawyers, there is a general consensus that “during a crisis, the client should not say anything.”

Communication advisers are also useful when dealing with political authorities. Rob Rehg, from the global firm Edelman, stated that one of the biggest challenges he has encountered is convincing a company that has never dealt with a PR firm to take its advice over that of a lawyer. For Rehg, lawyers are completely counterproductive in the political arena, a quite important stakeholder when foreign companies start their operations in the US. In speaking to that community, the key is to translate what contribution a company can make to the U.S. economy in terms of jobs, tax contributions and philanthropic giving.

Organizational management always has the need, and especially so in times of crisis, to have the excellent advice from their team of consultants, both legal and communication. Experience shows the validity of listening to both from start to finish of a crisis, overcoming the temptation to leave one of the two on the sidelines to avoid internal struggles. What would be more dangerous: to lose millions of dollars due to a legal sentence, or a long-term loss in credibility and your corporate reputation? In fact, in the vast majority of cases, there are not two completely different interpretations of the case but rather complementary opinions that may be integrated by taking into account both opinions and reaching an agreement about the best approach to be applied and agreed upon by both sides.

In this sense, Caponigro tends to advise top management to study the problem jointly with their legal team and their communication experts who have experience, objectivity and, at the same time, flexibility: “Do not make the mistakes of hiding critical information from one or the other, solely as a means of avoiding conflict and confusion. If you are lucky enough to have both an excellent lawyer and an excellent communicator, let both of them share in the information gathering process and in the decision making itself.”

This integrated approach will enable top management to avoid taking imprudent and naïve decisions. It is recommended to take into consideration all of the possible legal consequences that could be incurred by any specific public declaration, especially in a series of countries, as they may be interpreted as having admitted responsibility and therefore opening the door to economic compensation.

Usually, legal risks are easier to quantify and present a short-term threat for the organization while the risk to the corporate image is much harder to accurately evaluate and the consequences are much more long term in nature. Thus, legal advisors tend to reject any acceptance of responsibility. The challenge is to have a communicator with a management

mindset, learning how to quantify these data or at least showing their impact in respect to their stakeholders and/or publics and the ensuing business consequences.

Good results are easily achieved if corporate lawyers and communicators work together long before the crisis explodes. In fact, the lawyers within an organization may be converted into communication allies. This is especially true in the case of prevention because they both share the mission of advising top management regarding the on-going trend in respect to security and all safety precautions (legal compliance and due diligence), and may foresee the adverse consequences of a potential crisis attacking the corporate reputation. Thus, the specific moment to begin to work hand in hand is writing up the crisis scenarios and the response drafts (where they will provide details about the crisis management plan) together in such a way that a certain degree of consensus already exists when the crisis hits.

6. ACT ALWAYS ETHICALLY

A crisis uncovers the institution's soul and reveals its corporate culture. An unexpected event for which a standard response has not been foreseen reveals the company's true objective, the strength of its moral principles and the real existing unity in its interior. A crisis is the best test of leadership, bravery and creativity for an organization's management.

The way leadership is carried out during a crisis underscores an organization's concept of social responsibility and ethical values and what it considers to be its service to society: "It is often when corporations are confronted with what is for them a most unexpected event, to which they know how to respond, that they reveal their true purpose in our society, sometimes being able to introduce courageous policies, free on this occasion of the artificialities of a fixed industrial image — a phenomenon which never fails to surprise journalists and employees", comment Ogrizek & Guillery.

The ethical response is not limited to simply telling the truth, but to taking action and assuming the responsibilities that have taken place as a consequence of the institution's activity. This response has three elements: to immediately stop doing what is causing harm to people; to recognize the implications of what has happened without pretending to be unaware of the situation nor blaming others; and to accept the responsibility to repair any damage that may have been caused.

The first step consists in immediately stopping whatever it is that is being done wrong, interrupting the cause of the problem and eliminating the public risks being caused by the organization. The start of crisis management must be removing the causes of the problem. Only after this has taken place, the communication can play its role: informing about the actions that have been adopted, so your stakeholders accept and support them, and instructing them how to put these measures into practice. Bear in mind that the actions themselves are much more important than words will ever be.... They shout very loudly indeed.

Sometimes this attitude will imply major expenses: close down the factory for security reasons; recall a toxic food product; cover the medical costs of affected employees; stop pursuing a promising line of pharmaceutical research; replace brand new equipment that may be dangerous for our clients, etc. However, it is the only way to prove to our stakeholders that they are really the institution's prime concern and that the institution is managed based upon solid long-term criteria.

Cohn professes: "When a company discovers it is making a defective product and orders a recall, it is taking responsible action. When a company is caught hiding a problem, its response is perceived by press and public as "damage control" — the focus is on self-defense instead of the customer's well-being. Consumers never reward bad corporate behavior."

Secondly, it is absolutely necessary to publicly accept your own responsibilities for what has happened, when that is the case. This includes assuming responsibility for what a subsidiary did, without hiding behind it.

The opposite attitude would be to try to create confusion, distracting the attention towards other people in order for your publics to place the blame and/or responsibility for what has happened on someone else's shoulders.

This type of reaction, totally lacking any ethical basis, is what is known as spin. This means intentionally misleading people as a technique. The people who use spin as a tactic are fully aware of the weight of perceptions and symbolisms, they know how to make a journalist eager to publish a piece of news (or not publish it, whatever the case may be) and without the journalist realizing that he or she is being manipulated, without his or her consent.

Spin-doctors sell their expertise and unlimited creativity to an illegitimate interest. They do not lie, in the sense that they do not say a single thing that they know not to be true; yet they mislead everyone with the series of false hints and smoke-screens, using a series of grammatical tricks and expressions such as "perhaps" or "I would certainly not discard the possibility that...", in order to avoid any accusation later on of misconduct. Beyond a doubt, this way of acting is exactly the opposite of how socially responsible organizations should behave.

It would be even worse to directly accuse someone of having done something: this should never be done, not even when we are absolutely certain that third party is responsible for what happened. If the institution is totally uninvolved with the facts, pointing its finger at those who are really to blame is quite risky. There are three basic reasons not to do it:

- a) A private institution should not be doing the job of the state's attorney — accusing someone of wrongdoing. The institution should certainly provide the local law enforcement authorities with all the information they have, yet should only disclose publicly that information that proves that they are innocent.
- b) During a crisis, companies should act and be perceived as acting calmly. An accusation is a clear sign of aggressiveness and is usually interpreted as typical of a lower moral category. Publics do not react well towards institutions that blame others. The only thing that should be done is to put the information on the table: people are smart enough to know how to interpret this information.
- c) Moreover, the worst thing you can do in the midst of a crisis is to create an enemy. If there is a public debate about who is truly responsible, you can bet that both parties will inevitably end up with mud on their face, even though sometime down the road it is proven that the institution itself was truly innocent.

However, some companies prefer a blunter action, and shift the blame to another organization. In their eyes, it seems more effective to say, 'We are not responsible, but we know who is,' rather than just saying, "We did not do it." In reality, the results could be less favorable. When organizations cast accusations at one another, trying to place blame on the other party for the crisis, quite often heightens the uncertainty about who is responsible for the event, and the accusation affects to both of them.

Thirdly, and lastly, the institution should accept its obligation to repair any personal and/or equity damage that has been caused to any individual as a result of the company's activities. It is like saying, "if it is our fault, we'll pay for it".

Obviously, that does not mean that the institution should immediately be accepting the obligation to make any specific monetary compensation, as will be seen later on, but rather simply recognizing that the damage that has been incurred should be repaired in the most

convenient manner possible, when the institution is proven to have been involved. Their legal advisors should also approve this type of open commitment previously.

In summary: these three declarations of corporate responsibility and accountability by an institution underscores once again that facts are more important than words. The institution's credibility and prestige are not based upon a series of declarations of principles nor on any code of ethics, but rather on its day-to-day practices, and on how it reacts when hit by a crisis.

These three specific statements (stop the damage, publicly accept responsibility, and repair the consequences when blame is proven) are the staging point and cornerstone of the institutional response. Yet it is far from being enough to define a suitable response. I should also wonder how much responsibility I must admit, to what point I should emphasize my concern for what has happened, and to what degree I should make excuses.

Tough questions indeed. One thing is to be concerned and share people's pain for a terrible event; it is quite another to state, directly or indirectly, that the institution you represent is responsible. Anyone may sincerely share someone else's suffering and try their best to do everything in their hands to help them, yet, at the same time, not accept any responsibility whatsoever for what has happened. The ultimate ethical question, what I should do here and now, is never felt any stronger than in this situation.

As is true in the rest of the ethical dilemmas related to management, the response that I feel to be the most solid and efficient is to behave based upon truth and justice. With that foundation, companies should apologize when there is something to apologize for, and not to apologize and strongly defend your stance, when and if the accusation is false. This is the true sense of the word "apology": the defense Plato used with Socrates, showing why his teacher was right and not apologizing whatsoever to those who have unjustly condemned him to death. In those circumstances, defending oneself is an obligation imposed by the truth.

It is very easy to understand how many consultants may recommend a conciliatory stance, even in those cases in which the organization has no responsibility whatsoever to lessen the current level of tension and hoping that in such a way its enemies will be less aggressive in their actions. Yet it may be seen as being a sign of weakness and ends up strengthening those who are attacking it and the actions they are taking.

Hence, perceptions and reality should be carefully studied. When the company has clearly done something wrong, or the reason for the dispute itself is so minor that it is not worth fighting for, you can apologize and accept full or partial responsibility. However, sometimes the best approach is to defend the organization against an unfair attack and steadfastly refuse to apologize. Dezenhall & Weber suggest: "Companies in trouble need to do the right thing, but sometimes that includes going on the offense, whether that means pushing back at detractors or simply reminding people why you're worth supporting in the first place." The best decision does not always have to be the nicest one.

Three more thoughts before finishing this section. Apologies request pardon for the organization's misbehavior from the stakeholders who have been offended. In this sense, the litmus test of their efficiency is whether they have or have not achieved their aim. Consequently, after asking for forgiveness you must also listen to the other side to know if you have hit the mark, not gone far enough or overshoot the mark. If this is the case, you should start to quickly formulate a new, suitable strategy so as to close this episode as soon as possible. You haven't finished asking for pardon until you have been pardoned.

For much the same reason, apologies should be deeply rooted in local cultural norms, in the specific mindsets of the stakeholders and to the publics to which they are aimed. Not every culture values apologies in the same way or to the same degree. Crisis communication practice is completely enrooted culturally and — as has been shown in empirical research — there are differences between that which is done in Central and Northern Europe and that which is

carried out in the South and the West; and Lee has shown that in the West, remaining silent in the face of an external accusation is perceived as a big mistake, while in China a poor response is worse than no response at all: "Eastern cultures are more tolerant of silence and reserve in the face of an accusation." This should not be surprising as the consequences of losing face diametrically opposite in Western Europe and the USA as opposed to that in both China and Japan.

Finally, let's consider the ethical obligation of telling the truth. In talking about the first principle, we granted a high degree of relevancy to all of the subjective aspects involved in a crisis. Yet, we certainly are not going to underestimate the value of the truth of the actual facts. I would like to highlight that crises are intensely emotional situations in which the prime task is to restore public trust in the institution itself and in its leaders. There is no way to close a crisis when those responsible lack authority and credibility.

There are many types of authority in an institution: power, position, seniority, experience, performance... The fact is that crises trigger such major uprisings in organizations that the only authority that is accepted is that which is based upon trust. Moreover, trust is only obtained by telling the truth. "Tell the truth —recommends Henrici —, this simple imperative is the most evident and basic principle involved in communications ethics ... the truth is the norm."

Honesty and sincerity are recognized as the best practices in crisis management and communication. Truthfulness is indispensable in gaining credibility. Telling the truth in difficult situations will establish the basis for future cooperation with both the authorities and the other stakeholders that are directly involved. On the other hand, by being silent the only thing that would be gained is further distrust and, even more, it is useless. It may help on the first bounce but, in much the same way as a boomerang, it is bound to come back stronger and unexpectedly. In today's world, it is virtually impossible to assume that the truth will not come out.

Respect for the truth is especially important in crisis as the temptation to hide it is so very strong. Revealing a negative fact that clearly hurts our case is deemed as being negative in any circumstances and to do it precisely during a crisis may have very grave consequences indeed. Why reveal aspects that otherwise will not be in the public domain? For this reason, people quite often prefer to lie; the risk of "we could be caught" is less serious than accepting that we goofed.

In other cases, people justify not telling the truth in order to protect others: "Often, crisis managers believe that, by withholding information, they are operating in the best interest of the public. By so doing, they risk reducing trust. Maintaining honesty, candor, and openness in spite of the impediments is a fundamental exigency of most crisis communication", recommends Seeger.

People lie other times without premeditation, basically spontaneously. A corporate spokesperson is asked a question and he/she is unauthorized to reveal that data (perhaps for good reason). Feeling the need to say something or having doubts about what to say, ends up giving an answer that is less than 100% truthful. It is as if the lie was the most suitable reply to an illegitimate question. The justification for anyone who has done this is simply "you did not have any right to ask that question". Obviously, this type of behavior should not be compared to those who systematically fail to tell the truth but *a lie is a lie*.

We must admit that this total and absolute rejection for telling a lie is less than universally accepted. In some cultures, there is either no major moral sanction or the odds of politicians, top-level businesspeople being taken to court are so low that nobody is surprised that they lie, and if they were to be caught, nothing would happen anyway, so they do it all the time.

Nevertheless, if the institution is present in a wide variety of cultural contexts, the most prudent approach is to follow the strictest rules.

Lying is always wrong and in the midst of a crisis, it could be the most serious of all possible mistakes. Personal and business relations are based on trust and we all know that trust is gained little by little with lots of work involved while it can fly out the window by making one stupid mistake. Public trust in an institution may be retained even though a serious accident has taken place, but it will be totally lost if the error has been voluntary in nature and a lie will always be deemed as meaning a voluntary error. In this sense, as we will see in a moment, a lie will turn a crisis into a full-scale scandal, the highest degree of a problem that an organization may face within the scope of communication.

Beyond this, as we have already seen, we should not overlook that lying — in any of its multiple forms — is, most surely, the worst possible behavior in the eyes of any reporter. So, we certainly, should not be surprised that the mere suspicion of covering something up, instead of leading the reporter astray, will only make him or her more determined to find out.

In respect to this point, all communication aspects agree that no one should ever lie in any case whatsoever. There are no ‘white lies’ or “benign lies” and much less “legitimate lies.” You should not ever tell someone something that you know to be false.

In addition to the ethical standard, which prohibits lying, there is a pragmatic reason not to lie. You will lose all your credibility with everybody (employees, investors, clients, the press), and when that trust has been lost it may never be recovered.

I think this way of acting is right but we should go much further: it is necessary to underscore that we cannot lie and that lying is wrong, not because of the fact that it triggers negative consequences. Even when one would be able to get away with lying, because the publics have no way of knowing the truth, a lie is an unacceptable communication tool in general and much more specifically in crisis communication.

All the information released by an institution to all of its publics and through whatever channel it may choose must be truthful in nature. This way of acting is the only responsible behavior that an institution may use within the scope of its obligation to society as a whole. This rule is not based on reasons of efficiency but rather is a moral imperative.

Obviously, respecting the truth does not mean that you are obliged to give a long-winded answer to each and every one of the questions that may be raised by your employees, reporters, clients, etc. There are cases in which it is legitimate and proper to not provide all of the information that is being requested. Consequently, there is no ethical obligation to provide all of the information that is being requested, when for example, providing that information would be breaking the confidentiality rights of a person, be it a manager, an employee or a third party.

You should not provide too much information about an on-going issue, nor regarding a negotiation that is taking place because it may influence the way things unfold and even create an obstacle in that negotiation.

One may also provide a succinct response when the reporter or his newspaper/magazine is publicly against the institution or when past experiences have been negative so there are many reasons to doubt their evenhandedness. Ethical rigor is half way between trying to keep a secret and being naïve when faced with someone who refuses to accept the evidence: some reporters misuse their profession and the best approach a serious institution should apply with this type of journalists is to keep them as far away as possible.

The cases we have just been discussing are the exceptions to the rule: the information that is provided should be generous, there are serious reasons to justify limiting the general rule that *the truth should always be the complete truth*. As the German philosopher Hegel stated, “Only

the whole is true.” Partial truths, precisely because they are partial, may be completely false. This does not mean that for a statement to be true it has to say everything that may be affirmed in respect to this point; it may affirm in terms that are perfectly correct about one single aspect of the truth. Yet when this declaration is used to communicate, it will only be true if its context is evident and clearly indicates that it is merely a partial declaration.

Additionally, in those cases where you have the right to not tell the whole truth this fact does not authorize you to state something which is false. This is the time to explain why it is not possible to respond: because it disregards a person’s confidentiality; because this information should be released by some other organism (a law enforcement agency or a judge, for example); because it is being negotiated and therefore it is impossible to provide information until an agreement is reached; because it is sensitive data which could destroy a competitive advantage that has been achieved by the organization if disclosed, or simply because the information is not available at this point in time and will be released at the appropriate moment.

These may appear to be “non-responses” but at least they do provide a certain amount of orientation and respond to the other party’s desire to be informed and whatever formula may be used, the most important aspect is the attitude being shown: all of the sentences as tends to be the case, may be used even illegitimately as simple unethical tactics. The important thing is that what is said actually corresponds to a sincere desire to inform with the truth.

So, is there a moral obligation to tell the whole truth? Soria defends that you cannot demand from corporations to call the media in relation to any bad news that affects them. Nonetheless, you may demand that they present these facts honestly whenever they are so requested by reporters or when they are doing so on their own accord, in those cases that the facts may have repercussions on the publics with which the organization is directly related to.

Therefore, certain ideas — like “the public is predisposed to panic” — are nothing more than prejudices, and should be rejected: “One of the impediments to an approach leading to successful dialogue in a crisis is the myth that the public will panic if it has accurate information about a crisis. This myth is not supported by the available research, and, in fact, there is some reason to believe that withholding information from the public decreases the probability that it will respond appropriately”, says Tierney.

At the end of the day, it is a matter of being levelheaded and well balanced. When the news is bad, the organization in itself is an interested source of information and, due to this, it does not have a radical obligation to provide all of the details involved on its own accord. Yet, it is also true that the stronger they defend their own interest, less credibility they will have with others. Thus, the organization that knows how to overcome their own short-term self-interest when the time comes to communicate their own mistakes, will end up gaining a more solid and lasting degree of credibility.

Scientific research conducted by Arpan & Roskos-Ewolden, alas, has proven that the proactive strategy called “stealing thunder” gets good results: “when an organization steals thunder, it breaks the news about its own crisis before the crisis is discovered by the media or other interested parties.” Their empirical analysis shows that this strategy reinforces the organization’s credibility and is well received by their stakeholders, much better than any excuses that may be given once the facts have been revealed.

If there is a slight insistence here in the need to always tell the truth, it is because the temptation to take short cuts by lying is very strong indeed. Danish philosopher Kierkegaard once wrote, “Men are by nature more fearful of truth than of death.”

yago.delacierva@villanueva.edu