1 DEFINING CRISIS COMMUNICATION

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After reading this chapter you will be able to:

1.1 Understand how crises can have both positive and negative outcomes

1.2 Describe the types of crises that organizations or communities may experience

1.3 Identify the difference between crisis and commonly related terms

1.4 Describe the different types of crises.

1.5 Explain how the interconnectedness of how a global society impacts crisis communication

1.6 Identify the misconceptions associated with crisis communication

We live in a society continually affected by crises. On a routine basis, we experience natural disasters, such as hurricanes, tsunamis, and forest fires, and organizational crises, such as food-borne illnesses, corporate malfeasance, and terrorism. As we learned during the global COVID-19 pandemic, crises have the potential to significantly disrupt your personal and work life. No community and no organization, public or private, is immune from crises.

At the writing of the fifth edition of this book, the need for understanding effective crisis communication practices and building those skills are in ever-increasing demand. Since the last edition, we experienced the COVID-19 global pandemic that literally brought the world to a halt. In addition to the pandemic, we experienced social justice crises after the deaths of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Ahmaud Arbery. Wells Fargo dealt with chronic crises related to its corporate culture and leadership. Sherwin Williams created a crisis when it questionably fired an employee with a significant social media presence via Tik Tok. Some questioned whether the firing was related to how the employee was describing paint products on his social media account in ways that the company could not control. Amazon was forced to manage a crisis when some employees raised concerns about corporate culture and worker safety. Boeing experienced a crisis when two of its 737 MAX airplanes crashed four months apart after employees had raised concerns about the quality of the engineering of the airplanes. Finally, several universities across the United States experienced admissions crises when it became known that wealthy parents were bribing university officials to get their children accepted into the universities. That is only a very select sample of crises experienced over the past four years! We continue to deal with devastating crises of all types and as a result, the current need for effective crisis communication understanding and skills continues to grow.

Because of the prevalence of crises, organizations like the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), local and state emergency management departments, and public health departments, along with government agencies, public relations firms, and corporations across industries, need professionals who have sound crisis communication skills. In short, crisis communication skills and knowledge are useful in any industry. However, because of the frequency of crises, crisis communication skills are some of the most sought after by employers. Regardless of the type of work that you do, the knowledge and skills discussed in this book will enable you to communicate more effectively during a crisis.

Some might ask, "Who would want to work in a depressing field studying negative crises?" We answer by saying crises are not intrinsically negative forces in society. In fact, our proposition is that crises can actually lead to positive outcomes. We see crises as opportunities for learning and improvement. By their nature, crises are dangerous moments or turning points in an organization's life cycle; nevertheless, crises provide opportunities with the potential to leave the organization stronger in some ways than it was before the crisis.

If we do not study crisis communication, organizations and the many people associated with them are likely to be stunned, frightened, and depressed when enveloped by a crisis. In fact, some organizations communicate so poorly in the wake of a crisis that they are forever weakened, having lost the confidence of both their own members and the public.

This book presents strategies accumulated over many years of research as well as our experience as organizational consultants, emphasizing the opportunities in a crisis rather than the calamities of these events. The chapters illustrate key communication lessons to create renewal, growth, and opportunity following a crisis. At the crux of our argument is the contention that effective communication skills are essential to creating positive, renewing opportunities at these turning points.

The new edition of this book is organized into three parts designed to increase the reader's understanding and skills in crisis communication. Part I contains two chapters that develop the conceptual understanding of effective crisis communication. Chapter 1 directs the reader to consider expanded definitions of crisis communication and explains the many types of crises that one may experience. Chapter 2 introduces the reader to key research and theories in crisis communication. This chapter serves as a tool for building the reader's vocabulary for describing, explaining, and understanding crisis communication. Part II moves from the conceptual to the practical. In this section, the reader is presented with practical lessons, based on empirical research, for communicating effectively, managing uncertainty, and leading during a crisis. After each chapter of lessons, the reader is presented with an opportunity to apply those lessons to crisis case studies in the next chapter. For instance, Chapter 3 focuses on effective crisis communication. This chapter contains 10 lessons for effectively communicating during a crisis. Chapter 4 is comprised of six current cases to be assessed for their effective crisis communication practices. In this chapter, the reader is able to build his or her skills by applying the lessons of effective crisis communication to each case. Chapter 5 contains 10 lessons for managing uncertainty during a crisis. Every crisis carries with it some level of uncertainty. Chapter 5 explains how to communicate effectively under crisis-induced uncertainty. Chapter 6 introduces six cases the reader can use to test their skills at communicating under high levels of uncertainty. Chapter 7 delineates 10 leadership lessons for effective crisis communication. Chapter 8 consists of six cases designed to test the reader's ability to assess the effectiveness or ineffectiveness of the leader's crisis communication. In each of the case chapters, the reader is asked to make the call regarding the effectiveness of the crisis response.

Parts I and II thus provide the conceptual understanding and skill development for effective crisis communication practices. Part III contains chapters on learning through failure, risk communication, communication ethics, and a final chapter on inspiring renewal following a crisis. This third part of the book describes several content areas that every crisis communicator should consider as opportunities in crisis communication. In Chapter 9, we explain how organizations can improve their crisis preparation and response capacity by learning through their failures. In Chapter 10, we demonstrate how effective risk communication provides crisis communicators opportunities to prevent future crises. Chapter 11 examines the ethical implications of the crisis and the opportunities provided by strong ethical stances and communication. Chapter 12 proposes a theory of effective crisis communication we call the *Discourse of Renewal*. We provide a description of this theory along with its applications to crisis communication. Throughout the book, we turn to a small group of landmark cases to illustrate the various aspects being discussed.

A DEFINITION OF CRISIS COMMUNICATION

Initially, we need to clarify what we mean by *crisis*. In daily conversation, the word is used quite casually. As a simple experiment, listen to the people around you for a day or two. Most likely, you will hear friends, fellow employees, or fellow students describe routine problems they are facing—fender benders, forgotten appointments, bad hair days, or losing records of favorite university football teams—as crises. All are bad experiences; however, they are not, by our definition, crises. Similarly, with some degree of regularity, organizations face events, such as unexpectedly low sales or the defection of key employees. Again, these are difficult times for organizations, but they are not necessarily crises. *Crises are unique moments in the history of organizations.*

In a classic study, Hermann (1963) identified three characteristics separating crises from other unpleasant occurrences:

1. Surprise
2. Threat
3. Short response time

A troubling event cannot reach the level of crisis without coming as a surprise, posing a serious level of threat, and forcing a short response time. Let's take a moment to define Hermann's characteristics of crisis.

Surprise

Even naturally occurring events, such as floods, earthquakes, and forest fires, do not escalate to the level of crisis unless they come at a time or a level of intensity beyond the expectations of government officials and residents. For example, although the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, along with state health departments, had considered various large-scale health crises, the rate of infection and global impact of COVID-19 created high levels of surprise even among those closely involved in the preparation for responding to pandemic health crises.

Threat

All crises create threatening circumstances that reach beyond the typical problems organizations face. The threat of a crisis can affect the organization's financial security, its customers, residents living near a production facility, and others. For example, when a BP oil rig exploded in the Gulf of Mexico in 2010 and spilled millions of gallons of oil into the Gulf, the crisis threat was widespread. The considerable amount of oil on the water's surface was devastating to the fishing industry in the area. Birds and other sea animals were also impacted by the spill, thereby adding levels of threat to the ecosystem of the region. To begin to learn about the effects of the oil spill, BP initially contributed $500 million through a Gulf of Mexico Research Initiative to study the short- and long-term effects of the oil spill on the environment and marine life. One would expect the response and recovery efforts, along with a complete understanding of the effects of the oil spill on the Gulf of Mexico, to continue for many years.

Oil spills occur with some regularity worldwide. They are usually contained quickly, causing little long-term damage. Oil spills seldom reach the crisis level. In BP's case, however, the amount of oil spilled created a heightened threat level. Ultimately, the crisis became the largest environmental disaster in U.S. history.

Short Response Time

The threatening nature of crises means that they must be addressed quickly. BP was criticized initially for not communicating and responding more quickly to the crisis. In addition, the company was criticized for not having clear risk and crisis communication provisions in place for a disaster of this magnitude. As a result, after the explosion, the crisis appeared to be beyond BP's control as oil rapidly gushed into the water. Tony Hayward, the CEO of BP at the time of the crisis, was widely criticized for several communication missteps including minimizing the scope and intensity of the crisis and for lacking compassion and empathy in his initial post-crisis responses. Organizations must provide effective communication immediately following the crisis. This can be difficult because of the inherent uncertainty of crisis events and because little is often known about the cause of the crisis. However, organizations have a short window to take control of the crisis and set the tone for the response and recovery efforts.

As you can see from these examples, one of the most frustrating and distressing aspects of a crisis is the persistent urgency of the situation. This urgency is compounded by the fact that a crisis comes as a surprise and introduces extreme-threat into a situation.

EXPANDING THE TRADITIONAL DEFINITION OF CRISIS

An organizational crisis is a specific, *unexpected*, and *nonroutine* event or series of events that create high levels of *uncertainty* and simultaneously present an organization with both *opportunities* for and *threats* to its *high-priority goals*.

As we have established, much of the intensity of a crisis comes with some degree of surprise. Even in cases where there are clear warning signs, most people are still surprised when a crisis actually occurs. Thus, crises are almost always unexpected events. Because they exceed any planning expectations, they cannot be managed with routine procedures. Once an organization abandons its routine procedures, its leadership is faced with managing this uncertainty by emphasizing either opportunities for growth or renewal or threat to the organization's image or reputation in their crisis communication. See Table 1.1 for a description of each component in our working definition.

DISASTERS, EMERGENCIES, CRISIS, AND RISK

The term *crisis* most often relates to organizations experiencing high-consequence events. However, communities often experience disasters like tornadoes and hurricanes. Similarly, on a much smaller scale compared to crises and disasters, organizations or

TABLE 1.1 ■ Key Components of a Working Definition of Organizational Crisis

Unexpected	An event comes as a surprise. This surprise may be something for which the organization could not have anticipated or planned. It could also result from conditions that exceed even the most aggressive crisis management plans.
Nonroutine	Problems occur daily in nearly all organizations. To account for these problems, organizations engage in routine procedures. Crises are events that cannot be managed by routine procedures. Instead, crises require unique and often extreme measures.
Produces uncertainty	Because they are unexpected and beyond the routine actions of organizations, crises produce tremendous uncertainty. Organizations cannot be aware of all causes and ultimate effects of crises without some degree of investigation. Efforts to reduce uncertainty may continue for months or even years after a crisis.
Creates opportunities	Crises create opportunities that may not be available during normal business opportunities. Crises create opportunities to learn, make strategic changes, grow, or develop new competitive advantages.
Threat to image, reputation, or high-priority goals	Crises can produce an intense level of threat to the organization and its affiliates. This threat is often described as damage to the image or reputation of an organization. However, crises can also be threatening enough to permanently destroy an organization.

communities might experience an emergency, which is a small-scale crisis that is more contained and controlled than crises or disasters. For the purposes of our discussions in this book, an evacuation of a building because of a gas leak is an emergency. Now, there are important communication protocols for handling emergencies; however, they are outside the scope of this book. Conversely, a gas explosion at an organization is a crisis. The type of response necessary to deal with this type of crisis is directly within the scope of this book. Similarly, as you will see in the case chapters, the ideas discussed in this book are useful for understanding organizational and community responses to a wide range of disasters, like terrorism, natural disasters, and environmental disasters.

Furthermore, note that the foregoing definition does not mention risk. We separate crisis and risk because we believe that, while the risk is a natural part of life, a crisis can often be avoided. Naturally, some people live with more risk in their lives than others. For example, some people choose to live next to oil refineries, on hurricane-prone coasts, or in areas susceptible to mudslides or forest fires. Please understand, however, that crisis and risk are closely connected, as poor risk communication can cause a crisis. In Chapter 10, we talk more about the opportunities associated with effective risk communication. What follows is a discussion of various crisis types.

TYPES OF CRISES

Now, with that definition of organizational crisis in mind, think about some of the events that would qualify as a crisis. Have you been in a crisis situation either directly or indirectly? You may not have faced a Fortune 500 company bankruptcy, but you may have witnessed a flood, an organizational leader's dishonesty, a food-borne illness outbreak at a national restaurant chain, a catastrophic industrial fire, or the wide-reaching impacts of a terrorist event. All these incidents can be described as crisis situations.

Crisis communication researchers develop classification systems of crisis types to assist them in their crisis planning and in so doing, reduce the uncertainty when crises occur. The simplest and possibly the most useful distinction to make in crisis types is to divide them into two categories: intentionally caused crises and crises caused by natural, uncontrollable factors. When crisis planners attempt to think the unthinkable regarding all the potential crises they could face, the list is not only endless, but it is also unique to the organization. We do not pretend to list every possible type of crisis that could be caused by intentional or unintentional acts. Rather, we provide a list of categories into which most crises fall.

Intentional Crises

We identify seven general categories for crises that are initiated by intentional acts designed to harm an organization:

1. Terrorism
2. Sabotage
3. Workplace violence
4. Poor employee relationships
5. Poor risk management
6. Hostile takeovers
7. Unethical leadership

Since the distressing events that occurred on September 11, 2001, *terrorism* tops the list of the most urgent intentional causes of crisis. Organizations of all types must now be aware of their vulnerability to terrorist acts that can disrupt both the organization and the nation as a whole.

Organizations are also vulnerable to *sabotage*, which involves the intentional damaging of a product or the working capacity of the organization by someone inside the organization. Typically, sabotage is done for revenge or for some benefit, such as economic gain. Similarly, *workplace violence* has become all too common in the United States. Distressed over their perceived mistreatment by an organization, employees or former employees undertake violent acts. Sadly, this form of violence has become more frequent even on college campuses. The result is often multiple injuries, deaths, and disruption of the organization and its workforce.

Wide-scale crises can also result from *poor employee relationships*. If an organization cannot develop positive relationships between management and its workers, trouble is likely to occur. For example, an organization could develop a reputation of having poor working conditions. If these conditions persist, the organization is likely to have difficulty both retaining and recruiting employees. Without enough qualified employees, an organization cannot continue to function.

Another possibility is that, when unionized employees become very frustrated with their working conditions, they may choose to take some action, such as striking. In most cases, employee strikes adversely affect an organization's financial stability. We realize that poor employee relationships are not responsible for all strikes or employee turnover problems. We are convinced, however, that when turnover and strikes lead to crisis situations, the relationships between management and employees are often controversial.

If organizations are guilty of *poor risk management*, the outcomes can be disastrous for consumers, employees, or both. For example, a beef processing plant in a Midwestern city failed to adequately maintain its sewer system, creating a dangerous public health hazard. The sewer system overflowed, sending foul-smelling cattle waste and remnants from the slaughter process directly into a river flowing through the community of nearly 100,000 people. The ultimate consequence of this poor risk management was heavy fines that forced the plant to close.

Hostile takeovers are still a major threat to organizations. Simply put, hostile takeovers occur when the majority of an organization's stock is purchased by a rival organization. The result can be an overthrow of the current leadership and the dismantling of the organization. Hundreds of thousands of employees can find themselves unemployed because of actions that have taken place completely outside their workplace. Federal regulations address some of the issues related to hostile takeovers, but such aggressive assaults on organizations still exist.

The broadest and most inclusive subcategory of intentional crises is *unethical leadership*. An extensive review of more than 6,000 newsworthy organizational crisis events reported annually by the Institute for Crisis Management found that management was in some way responsible for the majority of them. Worse, many of these crises were caused by criminal acts of managers (Millar & Irvine, 1996). We dedicate Chapter 11 of this book to ethics. At this point, we want to emphasize that unethical behavior can and often is the ultimate cause of a crisis situation. When an organization's leadership knowingly puts its workers, consumers, investors, or the surrounding community at risk without being honest about that risk, two events are likely to occur. First, a breakdown in the system occurs, which often results in a crisis. Second, when the public learns of the organizational leadership's dishonesty, it is likely to be unforgiving. Thus, the road to recovery is likely to be much longer for dishonest leaders than it is for honest leaders.

Unintentional Crises

Clearly, not all crises are caused by the intentional acts of individuals with questionable motives. Rather, many are simply unforeseeable or unavoidable. In this section, we describe five types of unintentional crises:

1. Natural disasters
2. Disease outbreaks
3. Unforeseeable technical interactions
4. Product failure
5. Downturns in the economy

Like us all, organizations are vulnerable to *natural disasters*. Tornadoes, hurricanes, floods, wildfires, and earthquakes have the potential to destroy organizations' and industries' physical plants and entire communities. Although these events are largely unpredictable, some steps can be taken to reduce their impact on an organization. For example, building a nuclear reactor on or near an existing earthquake fault line would be unwise. Similarly, locating an organization in an area that is uncommonly susceptible to floods or tropical storms is indefensible. The earthquake in Haiti was much more damaging because of poor building practices. In short, organizations must take into account possible threats of natural disasters before they invest in their facilities. A natural disaster can be made much worse because of decisions made by organizations. Despite this caution, natural disasters are unavoidable as potential crises.

As we saw with the outbreak of COVID-19, *disease outbreaks* are an impactful and unpredictable form of crisis. Some of these occur naturally and spread quickly. Infectious diseases respect no borders, potentially spreading anywhere people interact. Other crises, such as food-borne illness, occur because of organizational failure. For example, Schwan's Sales Enterprises discovered that its ice cream, distributed nationally, was contaminated with salmonella. Thousands of consumers became ill. Schwan's successful crisis recovery was based largely on the fact that the company responded quickly with a recall in an effort to limit the number of illnesses caused by the tainted product. Product failures at some level are nearly impossible to prevent. The severity and frequency of these failures, however, can be reduced significantly with good crisis planning.

Many of the malfunctions that lead to crises are the result of *unforeseeable technical interactions*. In his classic text, *Normal Accidents,* Charles Perrow (1999) describes dozens of examples of organizations whose monitoring and safety equipment became inaccurate and inoperable because of a series of seemingly unrelated errors or equipment failures. For example, he describes how a commercial aircraft was forced to crash-land after a coffeemaker shorted out, causing an electrical fire in a series of wires and disabling other safety equipment and vital control systems. In this case, the pilots and maintenance crew were following all the prescribed procedures. The coffeemaker was wired appropriately. The crisis resulted from an almost unimaginable sequence of events piling on top of one another.

Product recalls are rather commonplace. Organizations discover unintended risks or flaws in a product, issue a recall, repair or replace the product or refund the purchase price, and move forward. Americans are so used to recalls based on *product failure* that many consumers weigh the inconvenience of having a product repaired or replaced against the risk posed by a flawed product. In many cases, consumers do not even respond to the recall. Some, however, reach crisis level. Organizations like Safe Kids Worldwide (http://www.safekids.org) monitor and list product recalls of all types for parents. By checking websites like this, one can see the varied and numerous product recalls that affect organizations and children across the world. For this reason, product recalls are one of the more frequent crisis types.

Last, organizations of nearly every kind are subject to crises caused by *downturns in the economy*. Even organizations that are ethical, thoughtful in their planning, and strict in their maintenance of safety regulations can be victims of economic crises. If consumers cannot afford an organization's products, there is little opportunity to resolve the situation with better communication. Downsizing and plant closings are often the result of economic downturns. From 2008 through 2010, the United States experienced one of the worst financial downturns in the economy since the Great Depression. The crisis, caused by increased risk taken by the banking industry and the collapse of the housing market, led to a complete collapse of our financial system. Businesses large and small had no access to credit and as a result, several large banks, such as Lehman Brothers, Merrill Lynch & Co., Washington Mutual, and Wachovia Corporation, went bankrupt or were taken over by other companies. In addition, companies like General Motors (GM) and Chrysler also declared bankruptcy, because of a lack of access to credit and the downturn in the economy. Economic downturns can create unexpected crises that have consequences that are far-reaching beyond the organizations that are responsible for creating the problems.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF CRISIS IN A GLOBAL ENVIRONMENT

Organizational crises are a consistent part of our existence. We cannot prevent them and as consumers, we cannot avoid them. Worse, crises are becoming more prevalent. Perrow (1999) explains that, as technology continues to advance, our population continues to grow, and the world continues to become increasingly connected through air travel and international commerce we are increasingly exposed to and affected by crises that we could not have imagined 20 or 30 years ago.

As consumers, we are also dependent on more organizations than ever before. Twenty-five years ago, the Internet was a concept, cable television was considered a luxury, satellite television was in its infancy, and cell phones were nearly the size of chainsaws. Now, these technologies and the organizations that support them are central features in our daily lives. As we become more and more dependent on the services of an increasing number of organizations and technologies, our exposure to potential crises naturally increases.

In addition, as we move closer to a truly global society, the incidents on one continent can create a crisis an ocean away. The COVID-19 pandemic illustrates the interconnectedness of our world and how infectious diseases can spread extensively even before we fully realize a region has been exposed. Another example of our global society is our food system. As we mentioned earlier, the 2008 crisis that began in China had severe effects on many infants and young children across the world who drank imported milk products tainted with artificially inflated levels of the protein supplement melamine. This crisis resulted in many countries banning, recalling, or creating more elaborate testing measures for any milk products produced in China. As our world becomes more complex, interconnected, centralized, and efficient, the frequency and forms of crises will steadily increase. Understanding how to effectively engage in crisis communication, then, is a skill ever increasing in value. To be effective, one must be able to recognize and resist the varied misconceptions associated with effective crisis communication.

UNDERSTANDING THE MISCONCEPTIONS ASSOCIATED WITH CRISES AND CRISIS COMMUNICATION

Before we move on to presenting key theories in crisis communication, we want the reader to consider 10 misconceptions that people have about crises and crisis communication. Our misconceptions relate not only to how we define and understand crisis but also to how we should communicate during a crisis. For this reason, this understanding is an important transition to our next chapter, which addresses theories of crisis communication. More important, our misconceptions about defining crisis and crisis communication practice often lead to ineffective and maladaptive crisis communication in practice. To be an effective crisis communicator means to resist these misconceptions. The preponderance of miscues and ineffective responses to crisis communication suggest that leaders and crisis communicators have some misconceptions about communication and crisis. What follows are 10 common misconceptions of crisis and crisis communication and descriptions of how correcting those misconceptions can lead to more productive and effective crisis responses (see Table 1.2).

First, a common misconception is that going through a crisis helps an organization build its character. We believe that crises do not build character but expose the established character and values of organizations through their communication. In fact, a

TABLE 1.2 ■ Misconceptions of Crisis Communication

1. Crises build character.
2. Crises do not have any positive value.
3. Crisis communication is about determining responsibility and blame.
4. Crisis communication is solely about getting information out to stakeholders.
5. Crisis communication involves taking a rigid and defensive stance.
6. Crisis communication is about enacting elaborate prefabricated crisis plans.
7. Crisis communication is about over-reassuring the public about the impact of the crisis to avoid panic.
8. Crisis communication is about communicating only when new information is available.
9. Crisis communication is primarily about managing the image or reputation of an organization.
10. Crisis communication involves spinning the facts surrounding the crisis.

crisis is one of the only times an organization's stakeholders can view the values of an organization in action. For instance, the ongoing crisis at Wells Fargo due to sales associates creating fake savings and checking accounts to meet sales goals illustrates the greed and unethical business practices inherent to the organization's culture. Similarly, Aaron Feuerstein's crisis communication following his plant fire in 1995 illustrated the care and value he had established over time for his workers and the community in which he operated. Both cases are discussed extensively throughout the book and suggest that crises serve as an opportunity to expose the current values inherent to an organization.

A second misconception about crises is that they are inherently negative events. As this book suggests, crises can present both threats and opportunities if viewed mindfully. Although threat often becomes the most salient feature of crisis events, we contend that crises should be viewed mindfully as dangerous opportunities, as discussed in our first chapter. For instance, the Greensburg, Kansas, case, discussed in Chapter 4, illustrates that crisis ultimately created an opportunity to save a town that was slowly in decline already. The food-borne illness crises for Schwan's and Odwalla, discussed in Chapters 4 and 8, allowed the companies to update their pasteurization processes and create safer food processing systems.

The third misconception about crisis is that resolution to a crisis solely involves retrospectively determining fault, assigning blame, and investigating what happened. Crisis leadership and effective crisis communication involve creating a vision for moving beyond the crisis, learning, and creating meaning. As you read the case chapter of this book, pay special attention to how the most effective leaders are able to develop a prospective vision during a crisis. Effective crisis communicators should not get mired in the investigation processes of a crisis. Pay special attention to the industrial fires of Cole Hardwood and Malden Mills, discussed in Chapters 4 and 8, as excellent examples of how leaders can resist the misconception that crisis communication is about determining blame and responsibility. In both cases, insurance companies and other agencies determined the causes of those fires. However, the leaders of both companies, Milt Cole and Aaron Feuerstein, focused on setting a vision for moving their companies beyond the crises.

The fourth misconception about crisis communication is that it is inherently about providing scripted messages designed in advance. We find that crisis communicators would do well to devote more attention to listening to and adapting messages for their stakeholders. Recognizing and responding to stakeholder concerns is far more important than producing prefabricated messages based on what the organization feels its stakeholders need to hear. Clearly, organizations can work with stakeholders to consider risks before a crisis and develop a crisis needs assessment of types of messages and preferred channels to be most effective. However, crises are dynamic and by definition, a surprise to most or all the people impacted by the event. Consider the 2008 collapse of the United States' financial institutions. Even with strong economic models and countless organizations in the financial industry, almost no one predicted the collapse of the housing market and the subsequent credit crisis. This example reveals that effective crisis communicators listen to the unique needs of those impacted by these surprising events to comprise their messages. The best crisis messages in this book come from leaders who responded to a crisis authentically based on laudable values and what they believed was in the best interests of their stakeholders. In each case, they met regularly with stakeholders to hear their concerns.

Our fifth misconception is that organizations and social systems need to become more rule-based and rigid in their organizational structure following a crisis. We believe that the more flexible and agile an organization or system is, the more it is able to respond to the uncertain, complex, and ever-changing demands of the crisis. Effective crisis communicators need to change accordingly and follow the dynamic nature of a crisis. Organizations would do well to take some action during a crisis to make sense of the situation. More often than not, organizations freeze and fail to act, often making the crisis worse. Organizations that embrace the situation and the uncertainty and take action to reduce uncertainty are more effective crisis communicators. Through a series of errors, a spokesperson in L'Aquila, Italy, miscommunicated the earthquake risk to a worried community. When a serious earthquake occurred, the residents felt betrayed. Several scientists were sentenced to prison for their role in assessing the L'Aquila community's earthquake risk. This failure to account for uncertainty created a prolonged crisis in Italy. The L'Aquila case is discussed in detail later in the book.

Misconception six is that having a crisis plan in place is the best preparation for a crisis. Although crisis plans can be helpful in preparing for a crisis, the best predictor of effective crisis management is strong, positive stakeholder relationships. As you read the cases in this book, pay special attention to how many effective organizations relied on stakeholders to support them during a crisis. For this reason, organizations looking to prepare for crises should work with their stakeholders to establish strong, positive relationships with them. We recommend that organizations work through problems and concerns before a crisis happens. Organizations that spend time establishing these relationships are better able to respond to the needs of these groups following a crisis.

Over-reassuring stakeholder safety regarding the impact of a crisis is the seventh common misconception of effective crisis communicators. Effective crisis communicators do not over-reassure their public but provide information to their stakeholders to help protect themselves. In Chapter 5, we discuss this type of communication as self-efficacy. The more you can do as a crisis communicator to help protect your stakeholders, the better. Over-reassuring stakeholders about the outcome of a crisis is sure to kill the credibility of any spokesperson.

The eighth misconception about crisis communication is to say *no comment* or to stonewall. Effective crisis communicators meet regularly with their stakeholders and the media to answer questions, remain open and accessible, and keep everyone updated with information about the crisis. Organizations are typically caught so off guard following a crisis that they do not know what to say. In this case, we suggest that they tell people what they know, tell them what they do not know, and tell them what they are going to do to collect information about the crisis.

Misconception nine is to focus more on the organization's image and less on solutions to the crisis. Ineffective crisis communicators try to control their images, scapegoat other parties and absolve themselves from blame. Once a crisis occurs, there is not much that can be done to save or repair an image. Rather, effective crisis communicators focus on finding solutions to the crisis and lessen the impact on those most impacted by the crisis. We contend that it is impossible to control the image or reputation of a company. Multiple events and perspectives by many different stakeholders comprise the overall image or reputation of a company. Ultimately, we argue that organizations should control what they can, which is correcting the problem and learning from the crisis.

The final misconception is that spin is a viable option in effective crisis communication. Spin only makes the crisis worse and makes the crisis communicator look unethical and irresponsible once the truth comes out. Be wary of any advice to use spin as a strategy in crisis communication. Organizations should be wary of those who suggest trying to spin the information surrounding a crisis to obscure responsibility. Organizations that resist this strategy are going to be more effective in their crisis communication.

SUMMARY

This chapter provided an expanded definition of crisis, explained different crisis types, and delineated key misconceptions associated with the understanding and practice of crisis communication. The next part of this book examines key theories of crisis communication. These theories provide both a vocabulary for understanding crisis communication along with ways to describe, explain, and prescribe the practice of crisis communication. Let's now examine how different theories help us understand and practice crisis communication.