

**CRISIS COMMUNICATION PLANNING AND MANAGEMENT AT HIGHER
EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS IN KWAZULU-NATAL**

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SAMEERA BANU HUSSAIN

Bachelor of Technology Degree: Public Relations Management

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Dr V.P Rawjee (D Phil)

Supervisor

Date

Mr P.J Raap (BSc: Agric; Hons: B&A; MBA)

Co-supervisor

Date

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Declaration

I, Sameera Banu Hussain, hereby declare that the work in this dissertation represents my own work and findings except where indicated, and that all references, to the best of my knowledge, are accurately reported.

Sameera Banu Hussain

Abstract

The National Plan for Higher Education (2001) provides a framework for achieving the vision of a single co-ordinated higher education system. In order to meet the goals of this plan, various technikons and universities had to merge. Pityana (2004: 4-5) points out that, in addition to opportunities, various challenges have also emerged from these mergers. One such challenge is that higher education institutions may find themselves in tensions with their partners which may result in disagreements that could lead to crisis situations. Marconi (2005: 262) argues that, in crisis situations, the pace of the conflict accelerates dramatically. This means that the affected parties have to react very quickly or risk having their ability to protect their interests substantially reduced, hence the need for a crisis communication plan. Implicit in this plan is the importance of communication. McCusker (2006: 108) maintains that, often in crisis a situation, communication gets distorted. As a result, rumours often supplant real facts. Thus, clear communication needs to be pre-planned and increased during a crisis. This dissertation, therefore, sets out to investigate the role of communication during the planning and management of crises at higher education institutions in KwaZulu-Natal. It reports on preliminary results of in-depth interviews conducted at higher education institutions in KwaZulu-Natal and offers recommendations so that crises planning and management may be improved upon.

Key Phrases: *Higher education institutions, Crisis Communication, Crisis Plan.*

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Preamble

Higher education plays a critical role in the social, cultural and economic development of any country. According to Higher Education South Africa (HESA, 2008:1), the purpose of higher education institutions is to meet the learning needs and aspirations of young individuals. They are responsible for teaching and training young people to fulfil specialized functions. During the apartheid era, higher education institutions in South Africa were structured around race dynamics which fitted into its previous legislation and policies of segregation. In 1994, the new democratic government commenced with a new agenda of change and transformation to reshape the South African society. Higher education institutions were a key prospect in this agenda of change (May, 2004: 1-2).

The *National Plan for Higher Education* (2001) provides a framework for achieving the vision of a single co-ordinated higher education system. In order to meet the goals of this plan, various technikons and universities had to merge. These mergers have brought about both challenges as well as opportunities for staff members and students. Pityana (2004: 3-4) explains that some of the opportunities that have resulted from the merger process are that higher education institutions now provide a sphere for public debate and encourage the development of a reflective capacity and a willingness to address and renew ideas and practices. They are also engaged in the pursuit of academic scholarship and intellectual inquiry through research, learning and training with the main aim of assisting students in making the best use of their talents and skills.

In addition to these opportunities, Pityana (2004: 4-5) points out that various challenges have also emerged from these mergers. Some of the main challenges are that higher education

institutions always find themselves in tensions with their partners. Policies, practices and objectives of these institutions must be continuously updated and re-negotiated through a variety of ever-changing interests and stakeholders. Intense disagreements have also come about regarding the pathways of achieving these objectives. Another important challenge is that higher education institutions may not live up to society's expectation.

Challenges that result in disagreements and tensions can often lead to crisis situations within the institutions. Therefore, it is imperative that higher education institutions be prepared to handle these crisis situations. Specht (2005: 1) defines a crisis as a difficult period of actual or perceived damage to an organization, institution or an individual triggered by a sudden event or rapidly developing problem. A crisis may affect safety, security, financial stability, reputation or the general ability to conduct business.

The Louisiana State University (2007) reports that crises that can occur at higher education institutions are strikes (staff and students), riots, and racism acts, outbreaks of fires and diseases, murder, rape and robberies. Marconi (2005: 262) argues that, in crisis situations, the pace of the conflict accelerates dramatically. This means that the affected parties have to react very quickly to changing conditions or risk having their ability to protect their interests substantially reduced. Implicit in this reaction is the importance of communication. McCusker (2006: 108) maintains that, often in crisis situations, communication gets distorted or cut off entirely; as a result rumours often supplant real facts. In these difficult situations, the parties' abilities to make rapid and sound decisions are largely dependent on the ability to quickly obtain reliable information. Thus, communication needs to be increased during a crisis and not cut off. Corrigan and Mortensen (2006: 2) maintain that communication should, therefore, be a long-term activity by which organizations use formal procedures to respond proactively to the crisis. In the event of a crisis, communication should, therefore, be a pre-planned necessity and should be a pivotal part of the planning and management of a crisis plan. This study, therefore, sets out to investigate the role of communication during the planning and management of a crisis.

1.2 The problem and its settings

Hwang and Cameron (2009:136) explain that, while leaders are always important for the success of the organization, during a crisis, they should take on particularly critical roles. They need to reduce the turmoil of the crisis and re-assert order and control as well as oversee the response strategy, hence the need for effective crisis communication during a crisis. Management, at higher education institutions, can avoid or be better prepared to handle a crisis if they carefully plan and manage for any crisis. Communication should be carefully threaded throughout the planning and management of any crisis as it plays an important role during a crisis. This study, therefore, sets out to investigate the role of communication during a crisis.

1.3. Aim and objectives

The overall aim of this study is to investigate the role of communication during the planning and management of a crisis at higher education institutions. The sub-objectives of this study are:

- to evaluate the crisis plan at higher education institutions in KwaZulu-Natal (KZN);
- to evaluate the role that communication plays in this plan; and
- to assess the role of communication during post-crisis evaluation.

1.4 Rationale for the study

Wilcox and Cameron (2006:258) assert that a crisis for any organization is usually an event or series of events that is unexpected. Therefore, a crisis presents situations for which one is unprepared. When organizations are faced with a crisis, they have no choice but to react as best as they can. However, if an organization's crisis plan is planned and managed and is facilitated by effective communication, organizations will be able to be proactive rather than

reactive. Ulmer, Sellnow and Seeger (2007: 40) purport that, during a crisis, immediate contact should be made with the internal and external stakeholders. Although the severity of the crisis may not be known, the stakeholders still need early and consistent communication about how the organization is moving forward. An and Gower (2009:107) state that organizations, that cannot or do not provide information during a crisis, force the media and other publics to obtain information from less credible sources, which leads to misperceptions. These misperceptions and incorrect information lead to significant organization losses. Therefore, it is essential that communication be proactive during a crisis. Communication is the binding element and a critical factor that should be present in an organization's crisis communication plan. Planned and managed communication can, therefore, be seen as a core element during a crisis. Within higher education institutions, crises are recurring occurrences. Therefore, it is crucial to investigate and develop an understanding of the role of communication during the planning and management of crisis at higher education institutions.

1.5 Scope of the study

This study is limited to higher education institutions in KZN. Personnel that are involved in developing a crisis communication plan and are members of the crisis communication team will be participating in this study. It is assumed that many of these institutions have developed, or are in the process of developing substantial crisis plans as a strategic priority. The study, therefore, assumed that crisis communication plans had been or were in the process of being planned at these institutions.

1.6. Research methodology

The above objectives are achieved by means of the following research methods:

- Literature study

A literature study using secondary sources of information was conducted with the

objective of establishing, and reviewing the literature surrounding the planning and management of crisis communication. It looks at the definition of a crisis, the components that make up the crisis communication plan; the three elements of a crisis communication plan as well as a model for crisis communication. Based on the literature review, a research instrument, in the form of an interview schedule, was prepared comprising both open-ended and close-ended questions that were used in the empirical study.

- Empirical research and study population

Higher Education institutions were identified in South Africa. Communication Officers as well as Media Officers from the selected public higher education institutions were contacted and asked to participate in the project, as they are responsible for planning and managing crises at their respective institutions. A census study was conducted. Semi-structured, face-to-face interviews were conducted using the interview schedule prepared from the literature review. To ensure validity and reliability of the instrument, a preliminary interview schedule was circulated among the Communication Officer and Media Officer at a Durban based higher education institution. Feedback was obtained regarding the following:

- Clarity of the questions; and
- Identification of other queries and aspects causing confusion.

1.7. Division of chapters

The remainder of this thesis is structured as follows: Chapter Two will consist of the literature review relating to the planning and management of crisis communication at higher education institutions. Chapter Three will focus on the research methodology for this study. Chapter Four will present and discuss the results of this study. Chapter Five will draw conclusions and

provide recommendations as to how higher education institutions use communication to effectively plan and manage crisis.

1.8. Conclusion

This chapter introduced the research problem, objectives of the study and justified the necessity for the research. The limitations, the key assumptions upon which the study will be based, and the methodology were presented. Finally, the chapter presented an overview of the chapters that follow and laid the foundation for this thesis. On this basis, the study now proceeds to providing an overview of crisis communication.

Chapter Two

Crisis communication

2.1 Introduction

The previous chapter discussed the motivation for the research and presented an outline of the study based on crisis communication at higher education institutions in KwaZulu-Natal. This chapter will review related literature from academic journals, books and other studies that have been conducted on crisis communication. In particular, it examines conflict management, issues management, risk communication, crisis communication and a model for crisis communication.

2.2 Overview of crisis communication and higher education institutions

Tench and Yeoman (2006: 397) define a crisis as an event that disrupts normal operations of an organization and, if badly managed, can ruin hard-won reputations. The Louisiana State University (2007) explains that “Crises can happen anywhere, at any time and often occur when they are least expected. When a crisis does occur, events usually unfold rapidly, leaving little time for planning, therefore advance preparation is essential”. Consequently, every organization has to deal with some form of crises during their existence. These crises can threaten the very existence of that particular organization. The effective planning and management of crisis communication plans is essential for the survival of any organization. Higher education institutions play a critical role in the social, cultural and economic development of any country. According to Higher Education South Africa (HESA, 2008:1), the purpose of higher education institutions is to meet the learning needs and aspirations of young individuals. They are responsible for teaching and training young people to fulfil specialized functions. Crises at higher education institutions may affect the safety, security, financial stability and even its reputation.

According to the Louisiana State University (2007), crises that can occur at higher education institutions are strikes (staff and students), riots, and racism acts, outbreaks of fires and diseases, murder, rape and robberies. Fortunato (2008: 3) reports that Duke University, a higher education institution in the United States, was involved in a crisis situation, when three members of its sports team were charged of first degree rape and sexual assault. As this crisis involved rape and sexual assault, the response of the University was closely monitored. Duke's response to the crisis was to accept responsibility for the incident, to be involved in constant communication with their stakeholders and to take corrective action to restore its reputation. Therefore, Duke's University had a crisis plan which they implemented in time so that they could resolve their crisis. Management at higher education institutions can avoid or be better prepared to handle crises if they have a crisis communication plan in place and if they effectively communicate during these uncertain periods of time.

Apart from having a crisis communications plan, public relations practitioners need to develop communication strategies and processes to influence the cause of conflicts to the benefit of the organizations' many constituents. This is known as strategic conflict management. The following subsection will further explain strategic conflict management and will demonstrate how issues management, risk management and crisis communication falls within the ambit of strategic conflict management.

2.3 Strategic conflict management

Wilcox and Cameron (2009: 245) explain that public relations practitioners need to develop communication strategies and processes to influence the cause of conflicts to the benefit of the organizations many constituents. These strategies and processes are known as strategic conflict management. These authors further maintain that strategic conflict management places a huge emphasis on building mutually beneficial relationships between an organization and its various stakeholders. Plowman (2005: 131) purports that the "strategic" part of strategic management relates to the need to accomplish goals and solve problems. It begins when public relations practitioners identify potential problems. Managing such conflicts reduces future costs

associated with those issues. Furthermore, participation with strategic management also elevates public relations from its typical role of reacting to events to a more proactive, responsive role of anticipating and reducing emerging conflicts.

2.3.1 The role of public relations in managing a conflict

Plowmen (2002: 284) states that public relations are full of paradoxes. It serves its organizations as well as the public's that affect that organization. It can be creative and technical staff role, yet there is a growing demand that it should assume a more strategic management role in organizations. According to Wilcox and Cameron (2009: 247), the influence of public relations on the course of a conflict involves reducing the conflict as soon as possible. Sometimes, an organization is able to catch a conflict at an early stage and reduce damage to an organization. However, in other cases, an issue may smoulder and finally become a major fire. This statement is supported by Lubbe and Puth (2000: 211) who explain that

Public relations are a managed function that identifies, establishes, and maintains mutually beneficial relationships between an organization and its various target publics on whom its failure or success depends upon.

They further attribute that conflict management and crisis communication is that public relations activity whose main objective is maintaining positive relations with its publics during a crisis in order to ensure its future successful existence. These explanations provide evidence that public relations practitioners play a significant role in conflict management and crisis communication. The public relations practitioner is also responsible for determining the stance its organization will take towards each target publics or the relevant stakeholders involved in the conflict situation. The stance taken depends on many factors which cause the stance to change in response to changing circumstances. The public relations practitioner should, therefore, monitor for threats, assess them, determine a strategy for the organization and thereafter begin its communication efforts (Wilcox and Cameron, 2009: 247). These authors further maintain that a conflict management lifecycle is a technique that public relations practitioners can use to deal with a conflict.

2.3.2 The conflict management lifecycle

Wilcox and Cameron (2009: 253) identify a conflict management lifecycle which includes numerous techniques that public relations practitioners can use to deal with a conflict. The conflict management cycle shows the “big picture” of how to manage a conflict. It can be divided into four phases which are the proactive phase, strategic phase, reactive phase and recovery phase. Events move in time from the left to the right through the four phases. At the end of the cycle, persistent issues will require that the process begins all over again from the left side of the cycle to the right. Figure 1 highlights the conflict management lifecycle.

Conflict Management Lifecycle

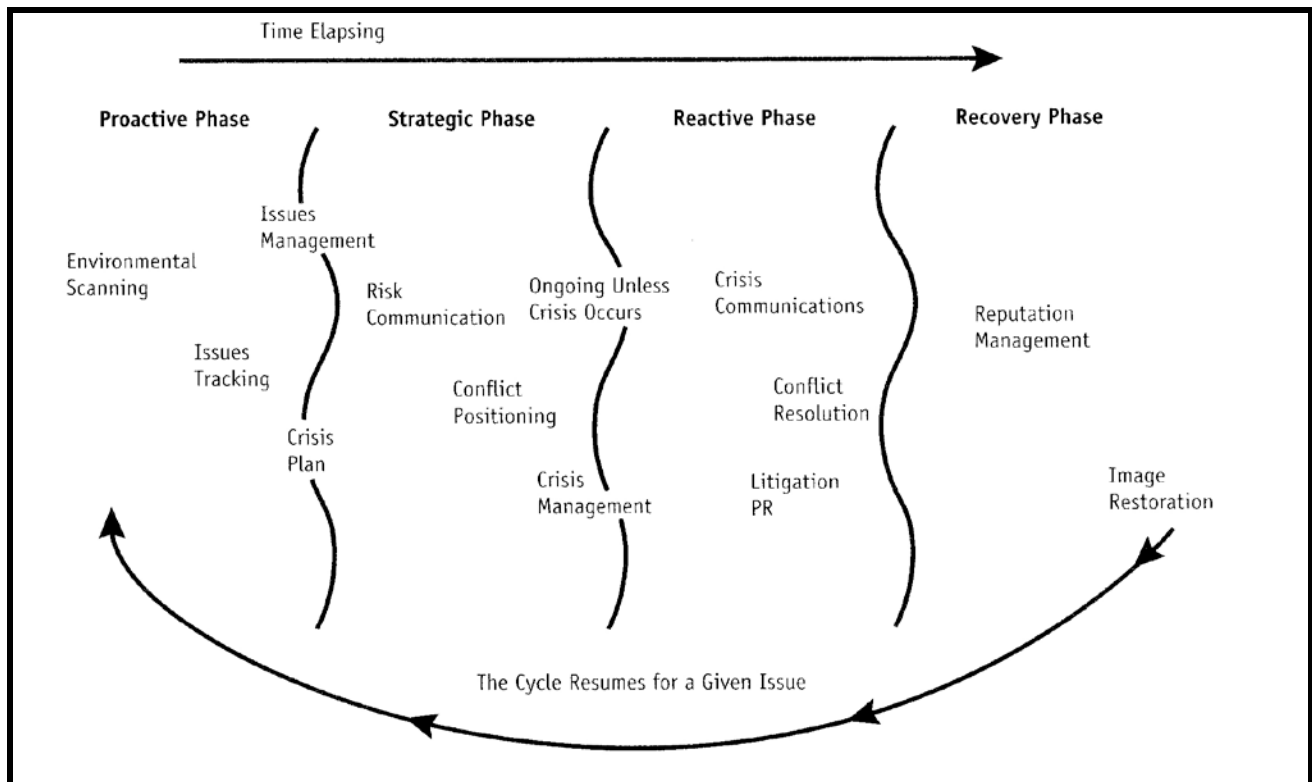


Figure 1: Conflict Management Lifecycle (Wilcox and Cameron, 2009: 254)

Wilcox and Cameron (2009: 253-255) further explain the phases of this figure.

- Proactive Phase

The proactive phase includes activities and thought processes that can prevent a conflict from arising or from getting out of hand. The first step in this phase is known as environmental scanning. Choo (2001: 1) defines environmental scanning as the constant reading, listening and watching of current affairs, with an eye to the organizations' interests. As issues emerge, issues tracking become more focused and systematic. Issues management can, therefore, occur when an organization makes behavioural changes or creates strategic plans in ways that address the emerging issue. In the proactive phase, a well-run organization will also develop a good crisis plan as its first step in preparing for the worst.

- Strategic phase

In this phase, an issue that has become an emerging conflict is identified as needing concentrated action by the public relations practitioner. Three strategies take place in this phase. Through *risk communication*, dangers or threats to people or organizations are conveyed to prevent injury or harm. Risk communication continues till the risk exists or until it escalates into a crisis. *Conflict positioning strategies* enable the organization to position itself favourably in anticipation of actions. However, issues that arise and resist risk communication efforts can become a conflict of crisis proportion. For that specific issue a *crisis communication plan* is developed.

- Reactive phase

Once the issue of imminent conflict reaches a critical level of impact on the organization, the public relations practitioner must react to events in the external communication environment as they unfold. Crisis communication includes the implementation of a crisis management plan in order to meet the needs of the various

stakeholders. The public relations practitioner may employ strategies to assist in resolving the conflict.

- **Recovery phase**

In the aftermath of a crisis, the organization should implement strategies to repair its reputations. Reputation management includes the systematic research to earn the state of the organizations' reputation. One should also take the necessary steps to improve it. As conflicts occur, the organization responds with actions of communication. Poorly managed issues and callous responses to a crisis can further damage an organizations' reputation. When this damage is extreme, image restoration strategies can be extremely helpful.

This cycle shows the various phases that conflict passes through. It can be noted that throughout the phases, importance is given to issues management, risk communication and crisis communication. These three aspects will be discussed in the following section.

2.4 Issues management

Skinner and Mersham (2002: 13-14) explain that what a business is able to do, increasingly depends on what it is allowed to do. The central challenge is for organizations to identify future issues and respond with timely strategies and programmes. Therefore, issues management can be defined as an early warning process that enables management to:

- Be better informed of changes that may take place in an environment that may affect them;
- Demonstrate to stakeholders an understanding of the organizations' business and its impact on society;
- Anticipate legislative and regulatory issues based on emerging issues, future public policies and corporate issues; and

- Assists in avoiding “surprises” which cost money and time and puts the organizations’ reputation at risk.

These statements are supported by Wilcox and Cameron (2009: 256), who assert that issues management is a proactive and systematic approach that is used to predict problems, anticipate threats, minimize surprises, resolve issues and prevent crises. They further state that effective issues management requires two-way communication, formal environmental scanning and active sense-making strategies. Hence, the main idea behind issues management is proactive planning, whereby issues can be identified and decisions can be made regarding them, before they can have a detrimental effect on an organization. Ulmer *et al.* (2007: 7) maintain that organizations can identify issues by tracking the press and mainstream media. Skinner and Mersham (2002: 16-17) identify seven key steps in the issues management process. These steps are illustrated in figure 2 (on the next page) and will be further explained thereafter.

The Issues Management Process

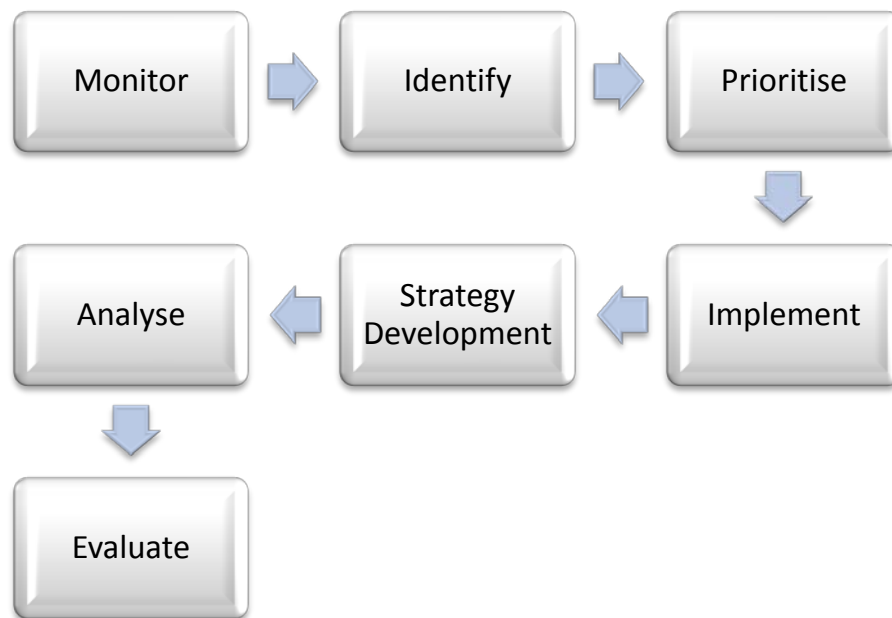


Figure 2: Issues management process (Skinner and Mersham, 2002: 16-17)

2.4.1 Monitoring the business environment

The first step involves implementing an environmental scanning programme to systematically monitor any political, economical, social or cultural trends that may affect the organization or any of its subdivisions. Choo (2001: 1) explains that environmental scanning is the acquisition and use of information about events and relationships in an organizations' external environment. The knowledge that is gained through environmental scanning can assist top management in planning the organizations' future course of action. Apart from environmental scanning, it is important to establish and maintain the source of information, which can be through the media, trade unions, academics or even government.

2.4.2 Identify important issues

During this step, all possible issues that are likely to affect business objectives or activities should be identified. The issues can be identified from the information gathered and from environmental scanning. This step is similar to the issue analysis stage identified by Wilcox and Cameron (2009: 257), who state that, once an issue is identified, it is important to determine whether the organization is vulnerable to the issue and the consequences of an organization turning a blind eye to the situation. Hogan (2002: 2) states that once issues are identified, they need to be classified and ranked. Classification determines whether the issues are an internal or an external problem. Hogan further states that internal problems go through to the internal management processes whereas action for external issues should be determined by the appropriate level of authority in the organization.

2.4.3 Prioritizing important issues

This step refers to allocating appropriate time to consider all the issues that can affect the organization. Thereafter, these issues should be put in an order of priority. The public relations practitioner has to assess the issues probability of occurrence and the impact that it could have on the organization. A small task force or work group should be set up with those line managers who should be concerned about the issues.

2.4.4 Selecting and organizing key issues

During this step, the working group should submit a working report to top management, containing the background, current status and likely development of the issues that were identified. During this stage, it is also important to recommend a strategy that can be implemented to resolve the issue.

2.4.5 Asking management to decide on a strategy

During this step, management has to decide on a strategy to implement so that the emerging issue can be dealt with. This step is similar to Wilcox and Cameron's (2009: 259) strategy option stage. They maintain that, when the emerging issue is potentially damaging, the next step is to consider what should be done about it.

2.4.6 Implement the programme

The public relations team should be responsible for implementing the programme chosen by the management team. Their aim should be to establish and strengthen contacts with their target groups, and communicate the organizations' position, both internally and externally, in a professional and credible manner. Therefore, this is a crucial stage.

2.4.7 Evaluating success and failures

When the strategy is in place and communicated, the final stage is to evaluate the results. The organization should try to measure the success of its strategies and programmes so that it can be better prepared for future events, but, above all, to improve communication with key stakeholders.

From these seven steps, it can be concluded that issues and situations can be effectively managed if these steps are followed and implemented in an organization. Seitel (2004: 442) states that issues management enjoys the prominence in the opinion of each organization, to the degree that its practitioner knows how to add value to their organization while balancing the organizations' interest with the community and key stakeholders. With issues management, the role of the public relations practitioner can be expanded beyond media relations and product publicity to a senior management problem solving function, which is a critical factor in any organization.

2.5 Comparisons between issues management and crisis communication

According to Skinner and Mersham (2002: 17-18), issues management and crisis communication are two closely related fields. However, there are differences. Skinner and Mersham further argue that an issue can be regarded as an infant crisis. Both, however, present some threat to an organization but over different periods of time. Barton (2008: 107) explains that crisis management requires more in terms of advance planning, team building, training and prepared plans. One should be able to “Press a Button” and a pre-planned operation should fall in place. However, when dealing with an issue, “Pressing a Button” should be the last thing that one does. He further states that as long as an early warning system is operational and one has identified the main issues that are developed, it is usually best to evoke one’s response at that moment. Like crises, issue scans also present opportunities as well as threats to an organization. Following up on issues management is strategic positioning which is also be known as risk communication.

2.6 Risk communication

Strategic positioning, better known as risk communication, refers to any verbal or written exchange that attempts to communicate information that puts the organization in a favourable position. Therefore, public relations practitioners not only communicate in a way that positions the organization favourably, but also influences the actual behaviour of the organization favourably (Wilcox and Cameron, 2009:260).

Risk communication involves the two-way exchange of information between interested parties in order to make decisions about how best to manage a risk. Skinner and Mersham (2002: 18) state that effective risk management involves determining the types of information that stakeholders are interested in, need and want. Thereafter, this information is presented to them in a useful and meaningful way. Hill (2005:4-7) explains that there are seven key principles of risk communication.

2.7 Key principles of risk communication

Hill (2005: 4-7) identifies the following key principles of risk communication, which will be discussed thereafter:

- Proactive and ongoing communication;
- Actively planning risk communication;
- Organizational culture;
- Management support;
- Providing adequate resources;
- Building trust and credibility; and
- Shared decision-making.

2.7.1 Establishing a proactive and ongoing communication programme between key stakeholders

A proactive and special effort is required to ensure that risk communication between experts, risk managers and the public is routine and sufficient. The best risk communication programme is proactive communication. The success of such a programme depends on (1) initiating it early in the cycle of concern, (2) devoting sufficient resources and attention to the task to ensure that key messages are communicated effectively, and (3) making risk communication an ongoing and continuous activity in order to establish an atmosphere of mutual trust and respect. Kundra (2005:94) explains that communication functions as a tool for an organization. Information is issued, received, interpreted and commands are acted upon. Proactive communication also allows organizations to manage ambiguity, uncertainty and assist in the aspect of risk communication. Hill (2005: 6) purports that, although communication should be proactive and ongoing, failures in risk communication are often caused by an information vacuum. This is caused when risk managers make no special effort to involve the public in their assessment and management decisions. Instead, the information vacuum is filled by other sources such as channels and media distortions, public perceptions and incorrect information

creates risk communication failures. By failing to be proactive, an organization may find that they may lose strategic control of the risk issue.

2.7.2 Actively plan risk communication

While many risk communication activities are unplanned, in order to be proactive, an organization has to pre-plan and be prepared. The activity of risk communication should be organized along a planned-do-monitor-learn management system. Some activities that can assist the planning for risk communication are:

- Identify and assess issues;
- Analyzing of the public environment (including stakeholder's interest and concern);
- Develop communication strategies;
- Development of a message;
- Working with the media; and
- Monitoring and evaluating public dialogue.

The advantage of developing a risk communication plan will ideally involve both the managers responsible for a risk and a communications specialist who can provide direction regarding the development of a communication plan.

2.7.3 Address organizational culture issues

Organizational culture often encourages practices and activities that run counter to effective risk communication. Addressing organizational culture presents a major challenge to risk communication and relates directly with the need for top level support and direction.

2.7.4 Ensure top-level support and clear management direction

The support of upper management is crucial to effective risk communication. Non-involvement by top management can waste time, impair decision making and jeopardize the organizations' credibility. Top management should have an active and visible role to play.

2.7.5 Providing adequate resources

Organizations often fail to devote sufficient resources or attention to good risk communication. This often leads to many organizations failing in risk communication. By providing sufficient resources to risk communication, an organization will be proactively preparing to handle any issues that may occur.

2.7.6 Building trust and credibility

The first step in building trust and credibility is to critically evaluate whether the public trusts one's organization. The first principle of risk communication is "to start with a critical review of one's own performance." There are four components of trust and credibility in risk management which are integrity, competence, empathy and openness. These components are necessary to build and maintain credibility and but they are not sufficient. One needs to be a competent risk manager. An organization's ability to properly manage critical moments is the central factor in shaping an opinion of its competence and integrity.

2.7.7 Share decision-making

Risk communication requires two-way communication and points to the need for some degree of shared participation in decisions about risks. Management should engage in communication with their employees as well as the public. However, every member of the public cannot be involved in every decision an organization makes: When should the public be included in

decisions? How? Who should be involved? To what extent should they be included? While there are no easy ways to answer these questions, a general guideline might be to involve the public and stakeholders as practically as possible. Common techniques are citizen panels, deliberative polling, scenario workshops and citizen juries.

The above mentioned seven steps can guide organizations in successfully preparing and implementing risk communication in the organization. However, communication still plays an equally important role. The following section explains the effectiveness of risk communication.

2.8 Effective risk communication

During risk communication, an organization has to know when, what, with whom, by whom, and how to communicate (Ulmer *et al.*, 2007: 154-155).

2.8.1 Who is responsible to communicate?

Public relations can be regarded as a multifaceted discipline, which is able to forge effective two-way communication between an organization and its various publics (Skinner, Von Essen and Mersham, 2004: 3). This statement explains that the public relations department would be responsible to manage a particular risk and effectively communicate with the internal and external publics. It is imperative that, at all times, an organization must be aware that outside stakeholders may take the initiative to communicate about any risk. By failing to be proactive, the organization may find that they will lose strategic control of the risk issue (Ulmer *et al.*, 2007: 154). Leiss (in Hill, 2005:9) argues that, despite growing competency in risk assessment and risk management, most organizations lack the skills to manage risk issues. Therefore, resolving this problem requires a concerted effort to build risk communication skills.

2.8.2 When to communicate

Risk communication needs both proactive and ongoing communication. Knowing when to communicate about which risk requires an understanding of the type of risk situation. Hill (2005: 9-10) identifies three types of risk situations, which are:

- Routine risks situations: these risks are well known. Risk managers are aware of the potential consequences and few uncertainties remain. Communication for this type of risk requires mainly the assurance that the risk is a routine case and that all managers within the organization are well equipped to deal with the risk.
- Risks with high uncertainty: these risks are less known and may lead to consequences that are not fully understood. In these situations, risk managers need to address the focus of the unknown. The main goal here is to address the competence of risk management and the manner in which the organizations monitor its impacts. It is also important to reverse decisions if negative impacts become visible and to proceed using a precautionary approach in order to avoid irreversible damages.
- Risks with a high potential for controversy: these risks may be uncertain or not, but they trigger high controversial or emotional responses. Often, public outrage is associated with these risks. Routine and ongoing risk communication is required for those risks that are well understood. On the other hand, controversial risks, where public outrage can escalate, demand proactive communication.

2.8.3 What to communicate

By looking at the risk at hand, a risk communication programme can be developed. It is essential to consider one's audience's needs, interests and knowledge level when designing the content of the message. The information should be structured so that simple messages are at

the beginning of a communication effort and more elaborate and detailed information should follow (Ulmer *et al.*, 2007: 155)

2.8.4 With whom to communicate

The general audiences for risk communication include the general public, the media, and interested public as well as key stakeholders. The approaches that are used to communicate will vary based on the type of the audience.

2.8.5 How to communicate

The content that is to be communicated may be different. However, the technique of risk communication is very much the same as other communication techniques. Some forms of communication are:

- Brochures and leaflets;
- Television and internet presentations;
- Public meetings;
- Face-to-face meetings;
- Press releases;
- Press conferences; and
- Round table meetings (Stakeholders).

2.9 Distinguishing between risks and crisis

Ulmer *et al.* (2007: 156) explain that risk communication can be defined as “an interactive process of exchange of information and opinion amongst individuals, groups and organizations”. The key word here is interaction as this differs considerably from crisis communication, yet poor risk communication can itself produce a crisis. Reynold and Seeger (in

Ulmer *et al.*, 2007:15) offer a clear distinction between risk communication and crisis communication.

- Risk communication is future orientated as it focuses on what may happen. In contrast, crisis is focused on a specific event that is occurring or has already occurred.
- Risk communication is designed to avert a crisis, while crisis communication seeks to explain the consequences of and resolve the crisis.
- Risk messages are designed to speculate about what might happen based on current knowledge. Crisis messages typically focus on a known event and speculate about how and why the event happened.
- Risk messages are designed for long-term planning. Crisis messages focus on the short-term, as they seek to address an immediate problem.
- Risk messages may come from technical experts who use their expertise to foresee potential problems. Once a crisis has occurred, most communication come for the delegated spokesperson of the organization as he/she is responsible for maintaining and re-establishing order for his/her organization.
- Risk messages tend to have a personal focus and should be interactive so that individuals can decide whether or not they believe that the risk is tolerable. In contrast, crisis messages address the entire community affected by the crisis.
- Risk communication has the luxury of time, whereas during crisis information has to be sent out as quickly as possible.
- Risk messages can be carefully crafted and controlled. Crisis messages must be developed spontaneously in reaction to the crisis.

From the above, one can note that risk communication and crisis communication differ dramatically, yet they are inextricably linked. Poor risk communication often produces intense crisis, whereas good risk communication can direct and diminish the impact of a crisis event. The next section introduces the concept of crisis communication.

2.10 Crisis communication

The conflict management process, as discussed earlier, which includes ongoing issues management and risk communication efforts, is severely tested in crisis situations in which there is a high degree of uncertainty (Wilcox and Cameron, 2009: 261). Wilcox and Cameron further attribute that sometimes in spite of risk communication and issues management a major problem can grow into a crisis. At such times, verifiable information about what is happening or has happened may be lacking.

This causes people to become more active seekers of information and more dependent on the media for information to satisfy human desire for closure. A crisis situation, therefore, puts a great deal of pressure on an organization to respond with accurate, complete information as quickly as possible. How an organization responds in the first 24 hours of a crisis, often determines whether the situation remains as “incident” or whether it becomes a full-blown crisis.

2.10.1 Definition of a crisis

Kanel (2007: 1) writes, “A crisis is a major occurrence with a potentially negative outcome affecting an organization or even an industry as well as its publics, products, services or good name”. Crises can happen anywhere, at anytime and can often occur when they are least expected. When a crisis does occur, events usually unfold rapidly, leaving little or no time for planning. Therefore, advance preparation is essential (Louisiana State University, 2001: 1). This point is supported by Tench and Yeoman (2006: 397), who state that the key to crisis management is preparedness. It is vital to effective crisis management that a crisis is identified before it happens and, when it does, that it does not get out of control.

The Institute for Crisis Management (ICM) (in Center, Jackson, Smith and Stansberry, 2008: 267) defines a crisis as a signified business disruption that stimulates extensive news media coverage. The resulting public scrutiny will affect the organizations’ normal operations and

could also have a political, legal, financial and governmental impact on the organization. The Institute for Crisis Management goes on to identify four basic causes of a crisis:

- Acts of God (storms etc);
- Mechanical problems (ruptured pipes, metal fatigue etc);
- Human error (miscommunication etc); and
- Management's decisions, actions or inactions (the problems are not serious and, therefore, nobody will find out).

Most causes fall into the last category and are a result of management not taking action when they are informed about a problem that eventually would grow into a crisis. Center *et al.* (2008: 267) identify two basic types of a crisis depending on the amount of warning time: (1) a sudden crisis, which comes without warning; and (2) a smouldering crisis, which is generally not known internally or externally until it goes public and generates negative news coverage.

Crisis often represents turning points in an organization in either a positive or negative way. Apart from only existing as a threat, a crisis can be seen as an opportunity if it is correctly managed. According to Augustine (2000: 1), "almost every crisis contains within itself the seeds of success as well as the roots of failure". A major crisis can affect an entire organization. In the case of higher education institutions, it will affect all stakeholders including members of staff, students and management depending on that particular crisis. However, a crisis that is managed correctly may result in an opportunity to establish a reputation of competence and credibility for that organization.

Leuke (2004: xvi) states that "managers whose organizations are in the midst of a crisis must act quickly to recognize its source, contain it and to eventually resolve the crisis, effective crisis communication is needed. Lubbe and Path (2000: 211) argue that the elements of the definition of public relations form the basis of a definition of crisis communication. They maintain that, "public relations are the management function that identifies, establishes and maintains mutually beneficial relationships between and organizations and its target publics on whom its failure and success depends". They further attribute that "crisis communication is

that public relations activity whose main objective is maintaining positive relations with its publics during a crisis in order to ensure its future successful existence". These statements, therefore, provide evidence that crises can be located within the aspect of public relations.

2.10.2 Crisis communication plans

The successful existence of organizations depends on how well it has prepared for a crisis. Therefore, it is vital that management set up a crisis communication plan. According to Lubbe and Puth (2000: 216):

A crisis communication plan is the planning process whereby a possible disaster is identified and the consequences are worked through in order to steer the affected organization along a survival path. The crisis communication plan should include information on the availability of funds and manpower and how to best utilise these resources to ensure the survival of the company.

It is important that management follow strategic guidelines when approaching a crisis situation. Black (2003: 42) purports that a crisis response strategy and its communication components is indispensable to an organization of all sizes in the age of increasing danger and uncertainty. This statement is supported by Borodzicz (2005: 75) who states that crises have become numerous, visible and calamitous. Organizations have no choice but to accept crises as inescapable reality that must be factored into their planning and decision making. Center *et al.* (2008: 268) maintain that a crisis communication plan should be practised into an organization. Successfully executing such a plan can be known as the acid test of an organizations' commitment to build, sustain and reinforce the community of trust, by confronting and overcoming the barriers to develop an effective crisis plan. By doing so, an organization will have taken the first step in anticipating, containing and responding to the most likely threats facing it.

Organizations, therefore, need to be prepared or have done some preparation that covers all the bases of a potential crisis. Some organizations are caught unawares when they have not planned effectively by leaving out minor details in their planning that may be detrimental to the

survival of that organization. Therefore, organizations need to ensure that they practices proper crisis management techniques.

2.10.3 Components of a crisis communication plan

A crisis response plan and its communication components are indispensable to any organization, regardless of size (Black, 2003: 42). Successfully executing against such a plan can be known as the acid test of a company's commitment to building, sustaining and reinforcing the community of trust, by confronting and overcoming the barriers to developing an effective crisis plan. By doing so, an organization will have taken the first step in proactively preparing to responding to the most likely threats facing their organizations. There are many crisis communication experts that advise on how to effectively manage crisis in different organizations'. In all of these publications, five steps are most common, which are depicted by Tench and Yeoman (2006: 398) in figure 3 on the following page.

A crisis has five stages

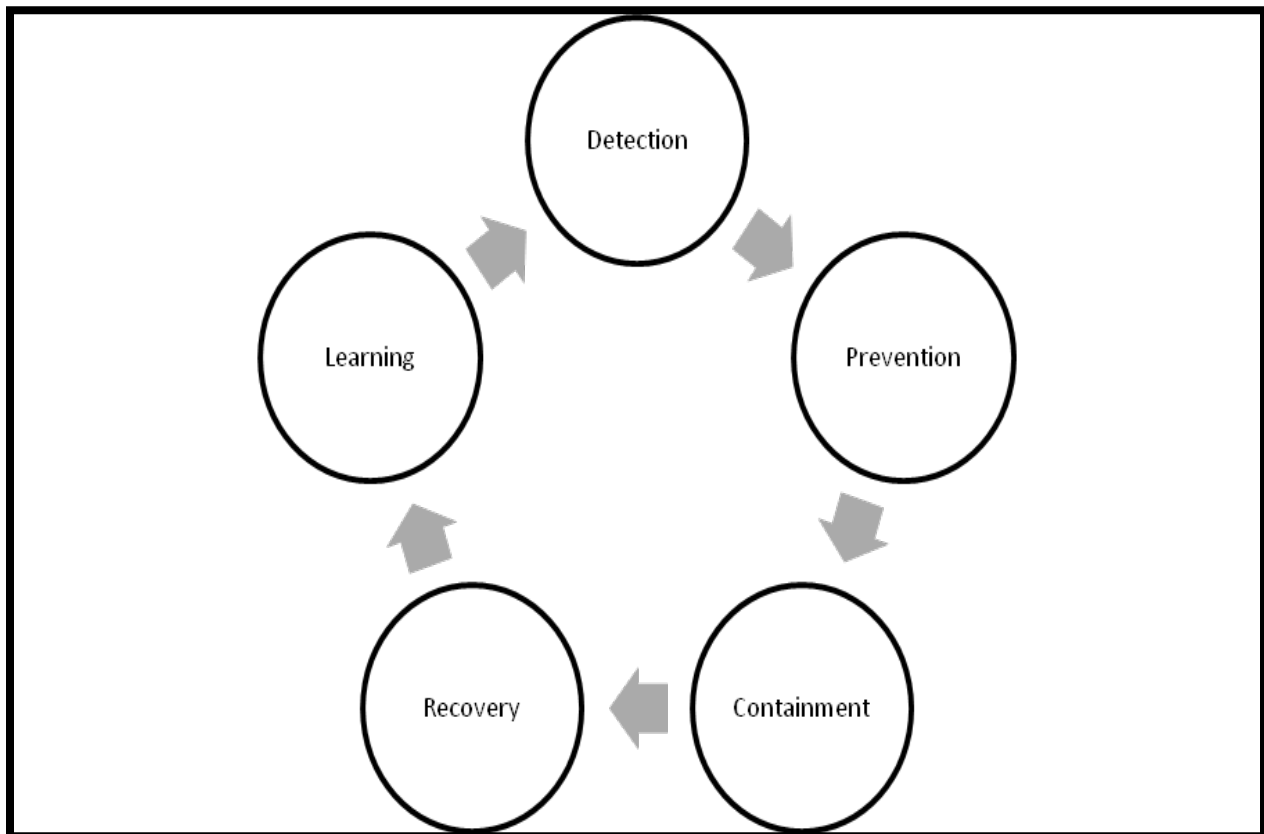


Figure 3: Anatomy of a crisis (Tench and Yeoman, 2006: 398-400)

These five stages, identified by Tench and Yeoman (2006: 398-400), will be used as a foundation and will be further exemplified by using different expert opinions and views on how to manage a crisis communication plan.

2.10.3.1 Detection

Detection is necessary as it highlights many issues and threats that lurk below the surface, as no one is sure about how to deal with them. Organizations prefer not to use the term “Crisis” because of a mindset that it automatically means “bad news”. Instead organisations use euphemism such as “potentially embarrassing situations” which is important to an organization and in which one needs to act quickly. This stage can also be regarded as a surveillance stage, as one begins with noting the warning signs (prodromes). Organizations should watch for prodromes and make attempts to stop it at that stage, before it becomes a full-blown crisis.

Crisis detection also refers to a system within the organization in which key personnel are immediately notified of a crisis. It is an added advantage if the organization knows about the crisis before the public finds out. This gives the organization the time to put its crisis communication plan into place.

Bernstein (in Skinner and Mersham, 2002: 24-25) refers to a methodology that is known as the “Vulnerability Audit” which entails the following:

- Collect data from people in key information flow positions. Senior management is not always aware of circumstances that could lead to a crisis. Interviews should be conducted with various employees from the organization.
- The interviews that are conducted are on an extremely confidential basis. Information acquired through the interview process includes significant inconsistencies. From the answers received from the different employees, potentially harmful trends and opinions regarding the probability of certain types of crisis can be found.
- Look for operational and communication weaknesses which could contribute to a crisis.
- Report the results and make recommendations.
- Discuss scenarios most likely to affect the organization.

From the information collected during the vulnerability audit, a written manual is designed, which can guide the entire organization in the communication aspects of responding to a crisis. The detection phase is, therefore, highly important, as by surveying the environment, changes that are taking place can be noted. This point is supported by Cutlip, Center and Broom (2006: 367) who maintain that the “key to anticipating and avoiding a crisis is assessing what can go

wrong, what can affect people or the environment , and what will create visibility”. They further state that when an organization in the same business as yours suffers a crisis, it is a warning sign to your organization.

An organization also has to note that “not every crisis begins with a fire, a network outage or other out-of-the-blue event”. Many begin with small problems. Left unattended, the problems grow. If management fails to notice and neutralise them, they may evolve into full-blown crises (Luecke, 2004: 26).

2.10.3.2 Prevention

Continuous, on-going public relations programmes and regular two way communication builds relationships with key publics, thereby preventing a crisis, lessening the blows of a crisis and limiting the duration of the crisis. The right corporate culture within the organization encourages open interaction of all employees. There are crises that cannot be prevented but every company should have a crisis communication plan, which outlines everyone’s duties during the crisis. Organizations need to be proactive rather than reactive. According to Augustine (2000:11), “if prevention does not work, it is important to prepare for the circumstance. That is, making a plan to deal with the variety of undesirable outcomes if disaster does strike”. Therefore, advance planning or “preparing to manage a crisis” will ensure that an organization will be able to cope with a crisis when it does occur.

Kanel (2007: 70) maintains that “the most important principle of crisis management is to think ahead, and the next requirement is to have a crisis [communication] plan”. Prior to setting up a crisis communication plan, it is important for management to identify and analyze the probable causes and types of crisis that could occur. Once this is established, a crisis communication plan can be drawn up to specifically prepare for each crisis. Cutlip *et al.* (2006: 36) indicate that crises fall into three broad categories:

- Immediate crisis: this is the most dreaded type of crisis, as it happens so suddenly and unexpectedly that there is little or no time for research or planning.
- Emerging crisis: this type of crisis allows more time for research and planning, but may suddenly erupt after brewing for long periods of time.
- Sustained crisis: this type of crisis persists for months or even years, despite the best efforts of management.

Kanel (2007: 77) states that “A well developed crisis communication plan should clearly state the organizations policies and procedures under emergency conditions and provide specific information required to carry these out”. The author further attributes that the following are key elements that should be present in a crisis communications plan:

- Purpose of the plan; the organizations’ philosophy and policies towards stakeholders;
- Agreement by top management to the above and selection of members of the crisis communication team;
- Explanation of specific responsibilities for each team member;
- Exchange of all communication contacts between members of the team;
- Listing of all local and emergency personnel, local officials, directors etc.;
- Listing of key media personnel;
- Physical description of the crisis control room and list of required equipment;
- Media response plan, including prepared press materials, location and requirements for press rooms, selection of primary spokesperson etc.;
- Description of crisis communication network, including telephones and other procedures;
- A training programme, including orientation with the plan manual, emergency response and communication and/or media training;
- Guidelines for communication during a crisis; and
- Suggested communication activities for crisis follow-up.

However, Ulmer *et al.* (2007: 78) maintain that an effective crisis management plan depends on the following four key elements:

- A clear definition of the organization's policy and procedures for handling a crisis;
- Assigning responsibility to specific personnel who would be most likely to be involved in the event of a serious crisis;
- Training key personnel to respond on the organization's behalf on television and radio interviews, at press conferences and on the telephone; and
- Establishing an appropriate communication's system and preparing appropriate facilities and equipment.

It is apparent that most of the components that Kanel (2007) highlighted is reiterated by Ulmer *et al.* (2006). Since both authors agree on these components, they should be regarded as vital factors to consider when planning for a crisis.

Fernandez and Merger (2005: 57) purports "while no one can predict a crisis, every organization can and should identify its vulnerabilities". In addition, Skinner *et al.* (2004:288) maintain that adequate preparation greatly improves an organizations' ability of communicating effectively and surviving an unexpected crisis.

Skinner *et al.* (2004: 288-298) explain the following initial points to consider when planning for a crisis:

- Faced with a disaster, assume the worst possible scenario and act accordingly;
- Have a crisis management plan prepared;
- Be prepared to express human concern for what has happened;
- In terms of communication, be prepared to seize early initiatives by rapidly establishing the organization as a single authoritative source of information of what has gone wrong and what steps are being taken to remedy the situation;

- Whenever possible, look for ways of using the media as part of one's armoury for containing the effects of a crisis;
- Win one's opponents over to one's side by getting them involved in resolving the crisis;
- Add credibility to one's cause by inviting objective, authoritative bodies to help end the crisis;
- In communicating about the crisis avoid the use of jargon; rather explain clearly what has happened and what one is doing to remedy the situation;
- Know your audiences; and
- When the dust has settled, look to see what one might be able to teach the rest of the industry from one's experience.

2.10.3.3 Containment

According to Augustine (2000: 15), this stage of crisis management is often the most challenging as one needs to recognize that there is a crisis that needs to be contained. One also needs to understand how others will perceive an issue and to challenge one's own assumptions. Leucke (2004:63) recommends a few suggestions to correctly recognize an impending crisis. These are listed below:

- Pay attention when one's instincts tell one that something is wrong;
- Confront disturbing facts as one finds them. Don't ignore them, minimise them, rather investigate;
- Consider the consequences if disturbing facts are found to be true;
- Ask questions: Is this a problem? What are the dimensions of the problem? Could they grow larger or more dangerous?
- Seek the counsel of others, particularly those that are close to the situation; and
- Let one's values guide one. Identify what is important and what is the right thing to do.

If there is already a crisis at one's organization, one needs to react immediately to contain it. Containment refers to the joint effort taken by employees to limit the duration of the crisis, or keep it from spreading to other areas of the organization. During this stage, the crisis communication plan should be put in place. The most important principle in this stage is co-operation. Everyone that is involved in the development of this plan should also be involved in its execution (Lubbe and Puth, 2000: 216).

Lubbe and Puth state that it is during this stage that top management needs to delegate and plan. Only through participation and co-operation can the plan be successfully formulated. It is also important for the organization to stay focused and motivated so that they may survive the crisis. Kanel (2007: 88) explains that this is the phase in which tough decisions have to be made and made fast. Kanel (2007:88) states that the first important aspect of this stage is to have a dedicated group of individuals working full time to contain the crisis. Secondly, an individual from the organization should be identified to be spokesperson.

Luecke (2004:66) defines crisis containment as "the decisions and actions that aim to keep a crisis from growing worse". It is imperative that, during the containment stage, management are aware of the characteristics of the crisis in order to control the commotion that arises in a crisis situation. Fernandez and Merzer (2005:3) explain that crisis share the following characteristics:

- Confusion surrounds the scene but slowly evolves into some degree of order;
- On-scene response is critical as it contributes to the chain reaction of events and media coverage of the organizations' capabilities;
- Events escalate as challenges continue to confront the response team, possibly attracting media speculation;
- Public interests soar initially, especially for reassurance, and then tends to diminish; and
- External influence is unavoidable as reporters, competitors and regulators comment on the responses received. This, in turn, influences public perception of the response effort.

From the above, one notes that crisis situations should be resolved as soon as possible. The most essential aspects during a crisis are communication and cooperation. When a crisis occurs, whatever communication that is relayed needs to be adhered to so that the crisis communication plan can be effectively carried out.

2.10.3.4 Recovery

Tench and Yeoman (2006: 399) explain that “in this stage speed is of the essence. A crisis will not wait, therefore it is essential that the organization acts quickly to resolve the crisis and implement measures to get the organization back to normality”. In the recovery stage, the organization returns to normal. The organization will want to move forward from the crisis and also restore confidence of their key publics.

Ulmer *et al.* (2007: 57) affirm that organizations are not structures made of positions or roles but communication activities. It is evident that every organization has numerous audiences. Therefore, it is necessary that management communicates effectively with them. Ulmer *et al.* (2007:57) further state that in order to communicate effectively, it is essential that one understands one’s target publics and how one wants them to react. There should be continuous communication with all target markets. Lueke (2004:81) recommends the following tips for communicating during a crisis:

- Be candid;
- Give facts;
- Be honest about what you know and what you don’t know;
- Record a voice message on the company information line everyday with the latest information; and
- Don’t speculate.

2.10.3.5 Learning

The learning phase is where the organization will examine the extent of the crisis. Aspects range from what was lost, what was gained and how the organization performed. It is an evaluative procedure also designed to make a crisis a prodrome for the future. Fernandez and Merzer (2005:213) identify some important steps to follow when a crisis has ended. These are:

- Declare an end to the crisis;
- Follow up with stakeholders; keep the media informed of any updates in the situation;
- Perform an act of goodwill. Do this during or immediately after the crisis, when appropriate and possible; and
- Conduct a post-incident analysis. This is an exercise for all members of the crisis communication team/management to reflect on the events as they transpired and to communicate ideas for policy and procedure improvement.

Additionally, if a crisis is effectively managed, it can be seen as an opportunity. Therefore, messages that management sends out to the media should be positive. The five stages of crisis management, as discussed provide an organization with a well-detailed layout of how to develop their own crisis communication plans. It also emphasizes the importance of each stage and how each stage can assist an organization to successfully manage a crisis.

2.11 Three key elements of crisis communication

In addition to these five stages of a crisis, Specht (2005: 1-3) identifies three elements which one would do:

- Before a crisis;
- During a Crisis; and
- After a crisis;

2.11.1 Before a crisis

Develop a crisis communication plan that consists of:

- Preparing an audience list. This audience list consists of stakeholders (both primary and secondary), the public and the media;
- Reaching out to the media and maintaining key relationships. This point is also emphasized by Lukaszweski (2001), as he believes that by that by maintaining trustworthy, credible relationships with the media all the time, the media will be less suspicious in the midst of a crisis;
- Assess potential crisis and draft talking points/statements;
- Monitor the news and the environment for potentially emerging problems; and
- Be prepared to respond readily and accurately to a 24-hour global media. One's response mechanism should be equal to that of the speed of the media.

2.11.1.1 Creating a crisis management team

A crisis management team should be organized. This team would be responsible for the immediate "hands on" operational response in the advent of a crisis. This team should be located on the site of the crisis. Members should be identified, and roles and instructions should be given.

2.11.1.2 Creating a crisis communication team

In this team, a spokesperson should be elected and given the necessary training in dealing with the media. The message that needs to be sent out is formulated, as well as the target audience, and media outlets that will be used. A plan should be made to set up a media crisis centre.

2.11.2 During a crisis

During this stage, a 24-hour crisis and media centre should be set up at a central location from which news is released, rumors are dealt with, facts are gathered and briefings are held. As soon as the crisis occurs, one needs to 'go public' immediately, so that both the media and the public know that one is dealing with the crisis. Accurate and concise information should be provided, and this statement is reiterated by Ulmer *et al.* (2007: 8) who state that the crisis spokesperson should say what he or she knows and should not speculate any information. Information regarding the crisis should be gathered as soon as possible, (who, what, where, when, why, how) and this information should be updated frequently and regularly. The internal and external publics also need to be informed.

Zappala and Carden (2004: 277) state that, during a crisis a 24 hour crisis, a media centre should be set up. The media should be monitored and errors that are reported should be corrected. Communication is vital during the crisis, websites can be established to inform people about the status of the situation, news releases, and any other relevant information can be put onto this site. Messages should be developed during the crisis and these messages should be clear and simple. The message should demonstrate concern about what is happening, and what the organization is doing to solve the crisis.

2.11.3 After the crisis

After the crisis one needs to evaluate the effectiveness of this crisis plan and how people responded to it. Correct the problems that arose so that they don't happen again. One of the best ways of performing an evaluation is to look at the various media coverage. The crisis communication team should convene after the crisis ends to evaluate every action taken and the crisis communication plan as well. Thereafter, the crisis communication plan is updated. It is important to learn from successes and mistakes made.

The five stages of a crisis, as well as the three elements of the crisis plan, identify key points that an organization should consider and implement within their organization. From literature

reviewed thus far, one can note that crisis communication plays a crucial role in any organization. Evidence has been given that if a crisis is properly managed it can create opportunities and, if not, it can be detrimental to an organization.

2.12 How some organizations have handled crises?

Crises are inevitable. No individual or organization is immune to them. Every organization will experience some form of a crisis. They are rarely planned, surface unexpectedly and disrupt normal operations (Marconi, 2005: 270). Center *et al.* (2008: 270-290) identify various organizations that have been through crises and how they have reacted. Discussed below are three different scenarios of crises and how their organizations have responded.

2.12.1 Exxon Valdez

On March 24, 1989 the Exxon Valdez struck Blight Reef releasing 11 million gallons of crude oil into the sea. This incident created a crisis of epic proportions for Exxon. They were now responsible for cleaning 1,300 miles of shoreline, and restoring the area to its original condition. The damage for Exxon did not end with the termination of clean-up efforts. Exxon Valdez remains one of the most remembered corporate crises. Environmentalists have perceived it as a limitless damage even though there are few remaining signs of the spill.

From the beginning, Exxon concentrated on emphasizing cleanup efforts rather than addressing the public perception that it didn't do enough soon enough. This became apparent as soon as CEO Mr. L.G Raw entered the picture. He was characterized as opposed to serving as a spokesperson, or even publicly showing interest, as he remained in New York until two days after the spill. When he finally entered the scene, he was described as rigid and aggressive. His inflexibility may have cost him opportunities to seek positive relationships with the various target publics.

When Exxon designated a location for the crisis centre, it created another situation that conflicted with its goals. The media centre was situated in the port of Valdez. Information coming through was often slow and communication lines became jammed with information inquiries from the media. Another problem for Exxon was that it did not address how the public perceived the spill and its effects. It focused primarily on the facts concerning clean-up efforts and let impressions form on their own. Exxon also failed to perceive the significance of visual images and the emotional response they evoked. Media images of animals in distress were displayed which increased negative perceptions of the company.

This resulted in Exxon becoming the scapegoat for all environmental causes. Questions such as: How could a company so vast have such poor crisis communication planning? Hadn't they learned by other companies' examples about what they should do and how they should act during a crisis?

To deal with this crisis, Exxon should have developed a plan that would have constructed a positive image. They should have spent more time emphasizing the personal commitment being made rather than the processes and money involved in the clean-up. Media research should have been conducted to identify the opinions of the public. An attempt should have been made to re-establish credibility and honesty. Exxon needed to make sure that all information was accurate and consistent. They should have revealed what was being done and why. Their clean-up effort was not effectively co-ordinated with the efforts of all groups involved. No one knew what each group should do or when.

From the above, evidence has been provided that perceptions speak louder than actual facts. They were forced to realise that perception controls reputation. The hard lesson learnt here is anticipation. Ignoring possible situations that may occur, whether they are positive or negative, can lead to loss of reputation and relationships' disruptions that may continue for years. Therefore, it is imperative for an organization to plan for such events in order to survive.

2.12.2 Hurricane Katrina

The morning of August 29, 2005, Hurricane Katrina first struck the lower Louisiana coast and then the Mississippi Gulf Coast. The facts about Hurricane Katrina are well known; hundreds of thousands of people displaced, hundreds of lives lost, property damage in the billions of dollars, confusion, consternation, and complacency coming together to leave a landmark American city in shambles.

No one was ready, not the people or even the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). No one was ready for the hurricane or its aftermath. No shelters were in place for those that stayed. No transportation was established for those who wanted to leave. No destinations were established for those who had transportation. No one was even prepared to communicate through the crisis. No one set a realistic agenda telling people what was going on, there was no attempt to set expectations- how long and how bad or how soon before it gets better.

In the aftermath of Katrina, the perceptions seemed pretty much in line with reality. The public were of the opinion that no one knew what to do. There wasn't any plan in place. Avoiding responsibility and affixing blame onto someone else seemed top priority. Poor planning, poor anticipation and poor execution were the main problems. There was no consideration prior to, during and after the crisis that would assist in the Katrina aftermath. No preparation was made. Decision makers were equally impaired. Planning and preparation are invaluable. When disaster strikes, it's too late to write a crisis plan or develop trust with key publics.

To deal with this crisis, one clear voice could have been established. Regular news alerts could have been scheduled. With a good crisis communication plan in place, there would have been more information to communicate. Such a plan would have been the operational component and the implementation component that would have given the communicators something to say. Good public relations could have also anticipated the conditions and set up strategies to lessen the blows of Katrina.

2.12.3 Hostage crisis

On December 9, 1997 a man broke into a home in the Orlando suburb and wounded a woman, killed a man, and disappeared. Police suspected John Armstrong. Police then spotted him driving on the freeway; he then fled on foot into Holden Heights. Ignoring orders from the police to stop, he leaped through the front window of a nearby home. Armstrong then held two mothers and two children hostage. His actions created a crisis on two levels. The first crisis was a situation in which people's lives were in danger. The second was a public relations nightmare. Armstrong threatened to kill the children and started making demands. After days of negotiating, the police force decided that the time was finally right to act. Armstrong had been awake for almost 68 hours taking only cat-naps. When he eventually did fall asleep, the Orlando SWAT team entered the house with orders by the team commander to keep the children safe at all costs. During the rescue Armstrong was killed and the children were returned safely to their mothers.

One of the first things that public relations professionals should know is that planning and preparation is invaluable to any organization. When a disaster strikes, it is then too late to prepare. The City of Orlando was right on target. Although city officials could not foresee this specific event, they were prepared for a crisis. The City of Orlando's mission statement calls for "Serving Orlando with innovation, responsiveness, knowledge, courtesy and professionalism". Because of this commitment to their mission, city officials began preparing a crisis plan case of emergency and handled the hostage situation successfully.

The media covered the story from the beginning. Not only were local media present, but national and international media as well. The spokesperson was able to satisfy all media requests for special interviews and give out timely information to meet news deadlines. The Orlando police department became a source of most of the information reported. From the beginning, Orlando's media strategy was to meet the needs of the media without comprising the efforts to resolve the crisis.

Communication worked to the city's advantage in two ways. Firstly, without trustworthy information, people assume the worst. Rumours thrive in the vacuum of no information. Since

the City was controlling the information flow, it kept control of the situation and what information was released. The spokesperson was also honest with the media and informed them of any new developments. This created a cooperative atmosphere with the media. At the same time, the other target audiences were being addressed.

Throughout the ordeal, the Mayor and public relations officer remained in constant contact with the SWAT team. They always knew what was going on and how the situation was being handled. The Mayor was behind the crisis plan. Good communication and good delegation kept the situation under control.

From this case study, one can note the importance of having a crisis plan and correctly implementing it. The previous cases did not have a crisis plan which lead to them being not able to handle the crisis. This case study also emphasises the importance of communication during a crisis with the media and the various target publics. The following section looks at a model for crisis communication.

2.13 Model for crisis communication

During a crisis, people tend to get reassurance concerning their physical well being and safety largely from believable information that is communicated to them from the organization (Center *et al.*, 2008:266). Unlike decades ago, when a crisis situation meant that the public relations practitioner had a minimum of a day or two to develop a strategic plan of action or reaction before the media coverage reached maturity and visual news went national or even international. Today, one is challenged by a pervasive instantaneous media force. A bystander can video tape or digitally record an incident with a cellular phone or digital camera and within, a second e-mail the footage directly to a news source. Add to this mix, now one has blog sites and multiple e-mails that create a forum for communication (Corrigan and Mortensen, 2006: 4). These developments show the rapid rate at which information is being communicated to various target publics. Therefore, crisis communication should be a long-term activity by which organizations use formal procedures to respond proactively to the crisis.

2.13.1 Crisis communication process model

Although many models exist to better define the life cycle of a crisis, the model identified by Corrigan and Mortensen (2006: 12-16) provides an all encompassing crisis communication process model.

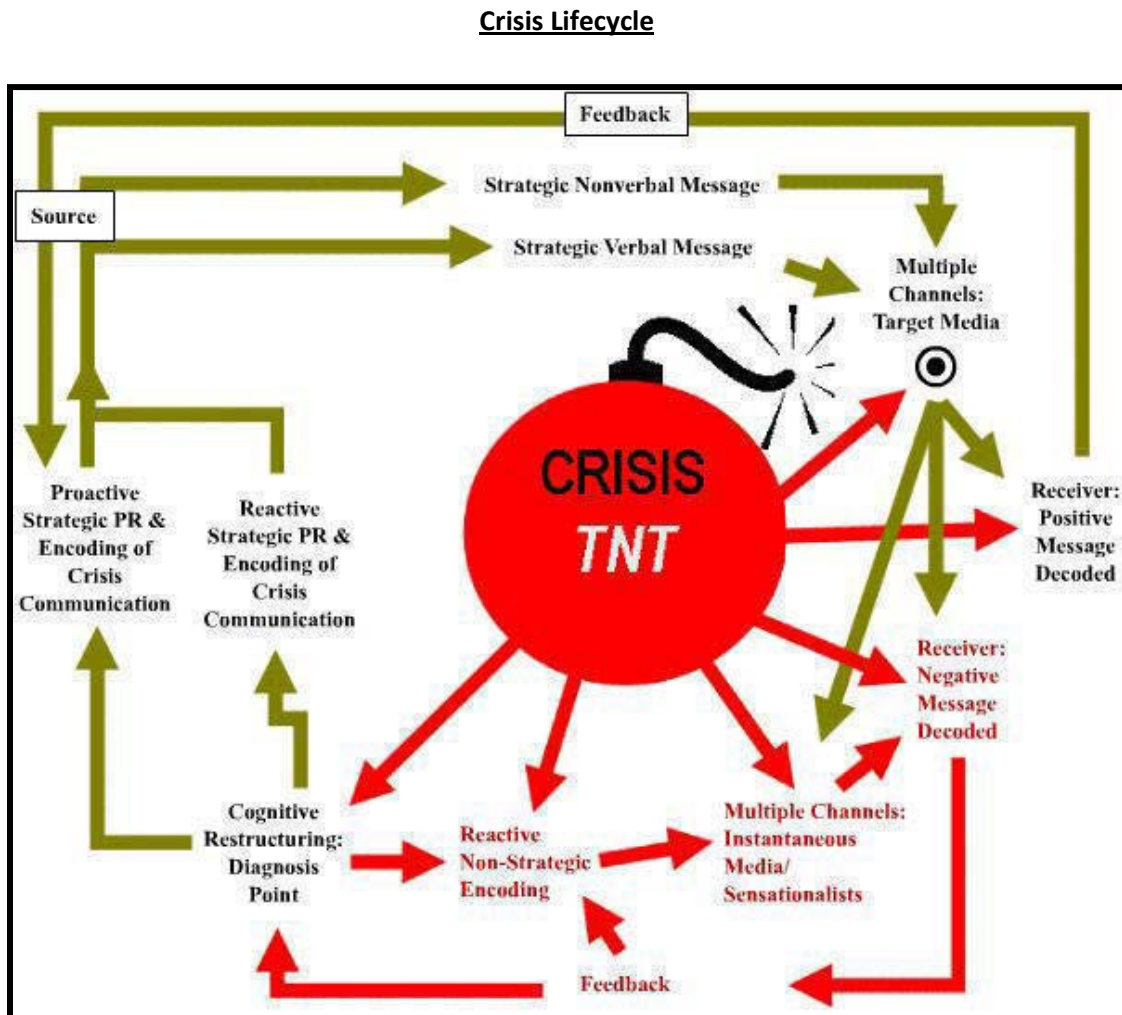


Figure 4: Crisis Lifecycle (Corrigan and Mortensen, 2006: 12)

This model represents a curvilinear bell curve moving through stages from birth, growth, maturity to decline. This model shows that the crisis lifecycle is dependent upon a number of additional variables. Unlike other models that had a definitive beginning and end, this model shows that the life cycle could last indefinitely till the organization remains locked in the lower

sub-process (highlighted in red) representing reactive non-strategic tactics. From previous research, one can assume that there are good ways and bad ways to handle a public relations situation. The bad ways seem to be more often associated with organizations that have not planned for any type of crisis, show no concern for the public, offer little explanation to the media and decide not to take any strategic approach to react to the crisis. Therefore, non-strategic reactionary approach is often received negatively by the media and, consequently, by the public.

This often leads to a spiral effect and many organizations get stuck in the cycle to just reacting and digging a deeper hole with the use of damaging statements and the lack of non-verbal gestures that could benefit the organization. While non-verbal gestures may be beneficial, they also cause harm. The non-verbal impact of visual footage or verbal stories from horrific events can impact greatly on the severity of the incident and leave the receiver decoding such information for a very long time (Huang and Su, 2009: 7). Organizations need to remember that strategic verbal communication is good for an organization but the truly significant effects come from the non-verbal gestures.

Corrigan and Mortensen (2006:16) further state that this model was designed to illustrate that a crisis quite often is like a bomb that sends dangerous fragments in every direction. In this model, one finds that there is a dualistic receiver function. The division between the receiver's perceived positive and negative valence was designed to show that the news of a crisis can leave the public very divided on how to feel about the actions of the organization under scrutiny. This is often the result of two different types of media coverage, (1) the instantaneous media that prefer to air a story before the facts have been checked, and (2) a more professional side of the media that believes in collecting both sides of the story before going public. From this model, one can note that it supports a proactive strategic approach.

It also illustrates the importance of building positive relationships with the targeted media groups, so that if a potential crisis event does occur, the organization has at least tried to build a good rapport with the media based on good will, concern and professionalism. This model emphasizes that channels of communication are multiplying and transforming greatly with the

advancement of technology. This model also conceptualizes the communication pattern an organization can take during a crisis situation and the need for proactive communication.

2.13.2 The 5C's of communication

Tench and Yeoman (2006: 403-404) postulate that the way an organization communicates to its target public is critical. They further state that whoever acts as the spokesperson should follow the proposed 5C's. The 5C's are: concern, clarity, control, confidence and competence.

- Concern

The organizations' spokesperson needs to show true concern about the problem, concern for what has happened and concern for the people affected now and in the future.

- Clarity

Organizations need to talk with clarity. They need to develop clear messages. What the spokesperson says at the outset will be repeated throughout the duration of the crisis.

- Control

When speaking to the media, the spokesperson must take control of the messages, the situation, the environment and the venue.

- Confidence

The spokesperson should get key messages across with confidence but without appearing complacent or arrogant.

- Competence

They must demonstrate competence and reflect how, as representatives of the organization, they will handle the crisis.

2.13.3 Why some organizations do not communicate during a crisis

Many authors demonstrate why organizations of this day and age should communicate effectively. Yet many organizations argue against it, as there are reasons why they are not able to communicate. Tench and Yeoman (2006: 403) list some of these reasons, which are:

- Organizations need to assemble all the facts before they communicate;
- Organizations often try not to create panic amongst their internal and external stakeholders;
- Some organizations may not have a trained spokesperson;
- Organizations may fear that the crisis will have a huge impact on its corporate reputation; and
- Key stakeholders of the organization may not know how to resolve the crisis.

From the above, one notes that organizations do provide valid points for not communicating during the crisis, but communication is an element which is necessary in any organization. Communication is necessary for creating a mutual understanding and transferring of information between the internal and external stakeholders. Huang and Su (2009: 10-11) maintain that organizations should have a timely response, which consists of disseminating information throughout the crisis. A consistent response demands that there is uniformity in the messages that are being sent out. An active response involves actively issuing responses and a positive behaviour; this shows that the organization is doing everything that it can to resolve the crisis. From the literature reviewed, it is evident that crisis communication is not simple or easy but it is pre-planned necessity that should be present at all organizations.

2.14 Conclusion

The literature review has presented what crisis communication entails. This has been used as a framework to compile the research instrument for this study in order to further probe the extent to which higher education institutions engage in crisis communication. The next chapter will discuss the research methodology that will be employed in this study.

Chapter Three

Research Methodology

3.1 Introduction

The previous chapter discussed the literature surrounding crisis communication. It also highlighted the components of a crisis communication plan as well as a model for crisis communication. Welman, Kruger and Mitchell (2005: 52) explain that, when research is conducted to investigate a research question or problem, data is collected from the objects of enquiry in order to solve the problem concerned. The result that is obtained provides an insight on the hypothesis and indicates whether it should be accepted or rejected. However, a crucial element in this connection is the research methodology that the researcher intends to use. This chapter discusses the research methodology that will be used to guide this research and enable the researcher to collect and analyze data. This chapter, therefore, covers the research design, target population, data collection methods, pilot testing, reliability and validity and the analysis of data.

3.2 Research design

Welman *et al.* (2005: 6-7) state that there are two approaches to research, which are quantitative and qualitative. Leedy and Ormrod (2001: 10) maintain that quantitative research is used to answer questions about relationships amongst measured variables. The analysis ranges from creating simple tables or diagrams that show the frequency of occurrence through establishing statistical relationships between variables.

Leedy and Ormrod (2001: 101-102) further maintain that qualitative research is typically used to answer questions about the complex nature of phenomena, with the purpose of describing and understanding the phenomena from the participant's point of view. It can be used

successfully in communities, small groups and organizations. The qualitative approach is also known as the interpretative, constructivist or post-positivist approach.

Qualitative research studies share one or more of the following purposes:

- Verification: they allow a researcher to test the validity of certain assumptions, claim, theories or generalizations within real-world contexts;
- Description: they can reveal the nature of certain situations, settings, processes, relationships, systems, or people; and
- Interpretation: they enable a researcher to (a) gain insights about the nature of particular phenomena, (b) develop new concepts or theoretical perspectives about the phenomenon, and/or (c) discover the problems that exist within the phenomenon.

This study will be conducted using the qualitative research method.

3.3 Target population

Welman *et al.* (2005: 52) explain that the population is the study object and can consist of individuals or groups of organizations. A research problem, therefore, relates to a specific population and the population encompasses the total collection of all units of analysis about which the researcher wants to make specific conclusions. This research focuses on the planning and management of crisis communication at higher education institutions. As there is a number of higher education institutions in South Africa, four public higher education institutions from the region of KwaZulu-Natal were selected. The Division of Corporate Affairs at higher education institutions are responsible for communicating to the internal and external stakeholders. Therefore, this division should be responsible for developing and implementing a crisis communications plan in the event of a crisis. As the target population consists of four units, a census will be conducted. White (2003: 59) describes a census as a procedure of systematically acquiring and recording information

about members of a given population. Information is only obtained from a sub-set of a population.

In this study, the census will include communication officers and media officers, where present, from the selected higher education institutions. As the total number of the population will be small, the census is a feasible option. Communication officers as well as media officers will be interviewed as they are responsible for communicating during a crisis and establishing a crisis communication plan. Therefore, communication officers are best qualified to provide information for this study.

Cooper and Schindler (2003: 374) explain that two conditions are appropriate for a census study. A census is:

- Feasible when the population is small; and
- Necessary when the elements are quite different from each other.

The size of the population is small as only four higher education institutions were selected. Therefore, the census is a feasible option. Each higher education institution will have a different method of planning and managing for a crisis. Therefore, a census, in this situation, is appropriate.

3.4 Data collection methods

Data collection is a process that involves applying the selected measuring instrument to the selected population for investigations. Visual observations, perceptions, responses of people and actions of the social world need to be observed by a more reliable and valid measuring instrument such as scales, questionnaires and observation schedules. If properly constructed and validated over time, such instruments assist in collecting data are more likely to be reliable (Babbie and Mouton, 2001: 67). Walliman (2006:280) states that some common forms of data collection methods are interviews and questionnaires.

3.4.1 Interviews

Saunders *et al.* (2004: 245 -246) explain that an interview is a purposeful discussion between two or more people. The use of interviews can help one gather valid and reliable data that are relevant to one's research questions and objectives. Stewart and Cash (2003: 1) state that interviews range from informal to formal, unstructured to structured, simplistic to sophisticated, a few minutes to a few hours. An interview can be seen as inter-actional as there is an exchange of beliefs, motives and information. The structuring of the interview depends on the type of information one wishes to receive. According to Saunders *et al.* (2004: 246), interviews can be put into three categories, which are:

- Structured interviews- use questions based on a predetermined and standardized set of questions. One reads out the questions and records the response. There are no interaction between the interviewer and interviewee;
- Semi structured interviews- the researcher has a list of themes to be covered. One may omit some questions. The order of questions may vary based on the flow of the conversation; and
- Unstructured interviews- they are informal. These are known as in-depth interviews. The interviewee is given the opportunity to talk freely about events and behaviour.

3.4.1.1 Advantages and disadvantages of interviews

White (2003: 27 -28) explains that some advantages and disadvantages of interviews are:

Advantages

- Provides access to people who cannot complete a questionnaire.
- Allows for in-depth questioning.
- Allows for clarification of confusion/misunderstanding by both the respondent and researcher.

- High response rate.

Disadvantages

- It is time consuming and expensive.
- Hard to tabulate responses.
- Respondents have less anonymity.

3.4.1.2 Face-to-face interviews

Face-to face interviews have the distinct advantage of enabling the researcher to establish a rapport with potential participants and can thereafter gain their co-operation (Leedy and Ormrod, 2001: 197). Leedy and Ormrod further maintain that such interviews yield the highest response rate. They allow the researcher to clarify ambiguous answers and seek follow-up information. Such interviews, although time consuming and expensive, are the most valuable and effective way of collecting information.

3.4.2 Questionnaires

A questionnaire is a data collection instrument that is completed by the research participants. According to Walliman (2006: 281-284), using a questionnaire enables one to organize the questions and receive replies without actually having to talk to any respondents. The questions are fixed and they do not change to how the replies develop, and the questions are the same for each respondent.

The method of data collection used was an interview schedule. Bailey (2008: 5) explains that, with qualitative research, the researcher has to seek out interaction with particular people and a common technique that can be used is an interview schedule. By using this approach, the researcher is able to make significant distinctions and draw meaningful conclusions. Of the three types of interviews (structured, unstructured and semi-structured), as discussed by Saunders *et al.* (2004: 246), the semi-structured interviewing technique was chosen. It was also

decided to conduct face-to-face interviews with the population of this study. The interview schedule comprised of open-ended and closed-ended questions. The open-ended questions allow respondents to answer these types of questions in their own words, no alternatives are given. Respondents are free to express their feelings and thoughts and provide reasons for their answers. The closed-ended questions method is easier for the respondent to answer, as alternatives are provided. The most common closed-ended questions are the yes/no option.

The interviews were tape recorded. According to Struwig and Stead (2001: 41), an advantage of tape recording an interview is that it preserves the actual language used, and it also provides an objective record of what was said. After the interview, the researcher is able to listen to the recording and take notes on important sections of the interviews. The responses were transcribed and analyzed using thematic analysis.

3.5 Pilot testing

Pilot testing is a process that involves trying out the research instrument on a small group of individuals before using it in one's research project. The main aim of pilot testing is to give the researcher an indication as to whether the research instrument will be effective in the study (Saunders *et al.*, 2004: 252). The research instrument for this study will be an interview schedule. The interview schedule comprises of open-ended and close-ended questions. The interview schedule was tested amongst a panel of academics who are involved in the communication field.

3.6 Reliability and Validity

Welman *et al.* (2006: 66-67) state that the reliability of a study is concerned with the findings of the research and relates to the credibility of the findings. The reliability of the study will be tested using the triangulation research approach.

According to Leso (2008:2), triangulation is an approach to data analysis that synthesizes data from multiple sources. Triangulation seeks to examine existing data to strengthen interpretations and improve on policies and programmes that are in place. White (2003: 66-67) maintains that researching the same topic by using a number of different techniques is complementary, with the outcome resulting in a more thorough understanding of the problem under investigation. White (2003: 670) further maintains that, with triangulation, it is possible to compare results which give the researcher more information about the topic under investigation. If results from the different methods point to the same inferences, they can strengthen the overall argument.

Based on this information, the study will, firstly, included other studies regarding the planning and management of crisis communication; it also included current literature on crisis communication. Lastly, interviews were conducted with the communication officers and the media officers at the selected higher education institutions.

Babbie and Mouton (2001: 122) maintain that validity refers to the extent to which an empirical measure adequately reflects the real meaning of the concepts under consideration. White (2003: 25) explains that validity is concerned with the idea that the research design fully addresses the research questions and objectives.

Babbie and Mouton (2001: 276 – 278) further explain that validity can also be tested using the trustworthiness approach. Trustworthiness is an approach that can be used to clarify the notion of objectivity in qualitative research. It can be assessed using four principles, which are credibility, transferability, dependability and conformity. These four principles and how they relate to this study will be discussed below.

- Credibility is the “compatibility between constructed realities that exist in the minds of the respondents and those that are attributed to them” (Babbie and Mouton, 2001: 277). One of the methods to achieve credibility is triangulation. This study, therefore, used the triangulation approach.

- Transferability is the “extent to which the findings can be applied in other contexts” (Babbie and Mouton, 2001: 277). Since qualitative research is not intended to generalize, it is the responsibility of the researcher who wishes to generalize these findings to assess their transferability. Consequently, sufficient detailed data were collected from the interview schedule.
- Dependability can be said to be similar to reliability. If a similar study were to be conducted with similar participants, then similar findings can be made. There can be no credibility without dependability and as credibility has been justified the findings have to be dependable. As this study is concerned with crisis communication at higher education institutions, the communication officers and media officers play an integral role in the planning and management for any crisis that may occur. Based on this it can be said that the sources for information are credible and dependable.
- Conformity is “the degree to which the findings are the product of the focus of the inquiry and not the biases of the researcher”. An audit trail, which consisted of source material (tape recording, transcripts, and field notes and data collection instruments), was made available to assess the quality of the findings.

From the above, it can be concluded that this study meets the requirements of trustworthiness. The triangulation approach and the trustworthiness approach ensured that the data collected and analyzed were reliable and valid.

3.7 Measuring instrument

The measuring instrument for this study was an interview schedule. The interview schedule was derived from the literature review. It consisted of open-ended and close-ended questions and were be conducted face-to-face

3.8 Analysis of data

Braun and Clark (2006:1) explain that interviews have become a commonly used qualitative methodology for collecting data. Once the information is gathered, the researcher is faced with the decision on how to analyze the data. There are many ways to analyze data. One such way is through thematic analysis. White (2003:24) states that qualitative approach is incredibly diverse and complex and thematic analysis should be seen as a foundational method for qualitative analysis. Braun and Clark (2006:1) describe thematic analysis as a method for identifying, analyzing and reporting on patterns (themes) within the data that is collected.

Braun and Clark (2006:1-2) further maintain that a theme captures something important about the data in relation to the research question and represents some level of patterned response within the data set. The first step is to collect the data and, thereafter, transcribed conversations, and experiences can be listed. The next step is to build a valid argument for choosing the themes. This is done by reading and referring to related literature. By referring back to the literature, the interviewer can gain information that allows the researcher to make inferences from the interview. When the literature is interwoven with the findings, the story that the interviewer constructs is one that stands with merit.

For this research, an interview schedule was developed and administered to the communication officers as well as the media officers of the higher education institutions. Thematic analysis was used to interpret the results derived from the interview schedules. Common themes were identified and analyzed from the interviews that were conducted. Thereafter, a comparative analysis was done between the results obtained from the interview schedules and the literature review and other studies that were conducted on crisis communication.

3.9 Conclusion

This chapter has discussed the research methodology that was used in terms of the research design, target population, data collection methods. This chapter has also highlighted how the data was analyzed and the reliability and validity of the study were tested. This study, therefore, used the research methodology to collect data on, how crisis communication is planned and managed at higher education institution in KwaZulu-Natal. The next chapter will analyze and interpret the data collected.

CHAPTER FOUR

DATA ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

4.1 Introduction

The previous chapter discussed the methodology that will be employed in this study. The execution of the field work for this chapter was based on the methodology outlined in the previous chapter. Interview schedules were developed and administered to the communication officers and media officers at four public higher education institutions in KwaZulu-Natal. According to Walliman (2006: 301), little sense can be made of a huge collection of data. Therefore, an essential part of research is the analysis of data. This chapter sets out to analyze and interpret the results of the interview schedules. The data is analyzed by transcribing the information received and interpreting it. Thereafter, the findings of the study are compared to the literature review.

4.2 Report and analysis of interview schedule administered to the communication officers

4.2.1 Strategic planning

1. Does your organization have a strategic plan?

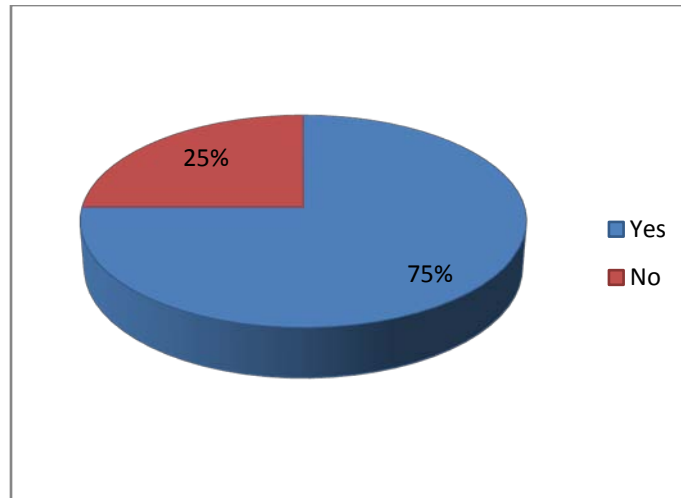


Figure 4.1: Does your organization have a strategic plan?

Interpretation

Findings reveal that 75% of the institutions (depicted in figure 4.1) have a strategic plan whilst 25% of the respondents indicated that their institution did not have a plan. Therefore 75% of the respondents confirm Wilcox and Cameron's (2009: 247) views regarding strategic plans.

2. Does it address the management of conflict?

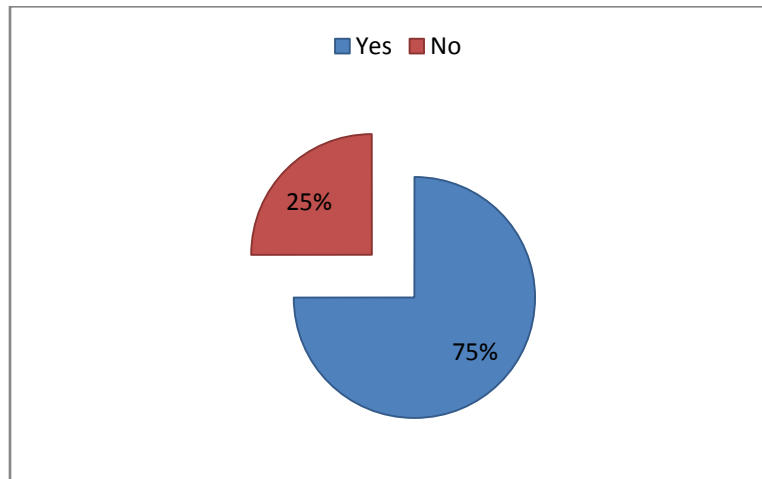


Figure 4.2: Does it address the management of conflict?

Interpretation

The responses received are similar as 75% of the institutions have a strategic plan and they do address the management of conflict, whilst 25% of the institutions don't. These findings are depicted in figure 4.2. The responses confirm Wilcox and Cameron's (2009: 247) statements regarding conflict management. These authors further explain that communication strategies and processes should be developed to assist in resolving conflicts. Resolution of conflict is the focus of strategic conflict management.

4.2.2 Strategic Conflict Management

1. Does your organization conduct environmental scanning?

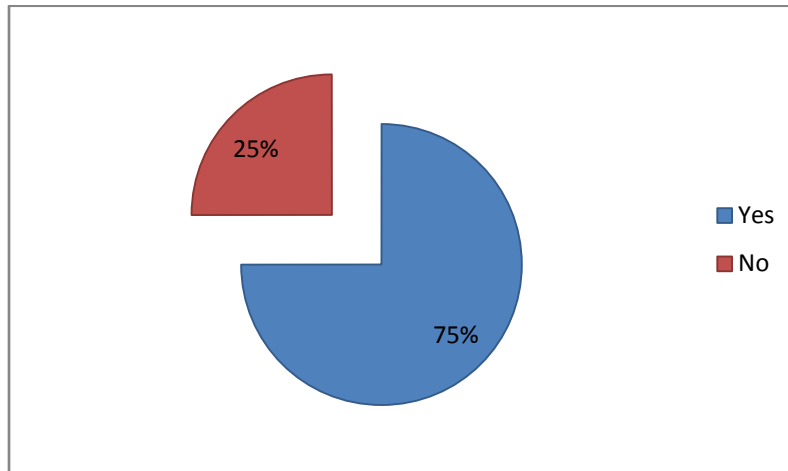


Figure 4.3: Does your organization conduct environmental scanning?

Interpretation

The importance of environmental scanning, as indicated by Choo (2001:1), is confirmed by the responses received, as the majority of the interviewees (75%) indicated that they do conduct environmental scanning (refer to figure 4.3). Findings show that 75% of the higher education institutions are constantly monitoring the environment for changes that could affect them and plan ways in which these issues are addressed.

2. What tools are used for environmental scanning?

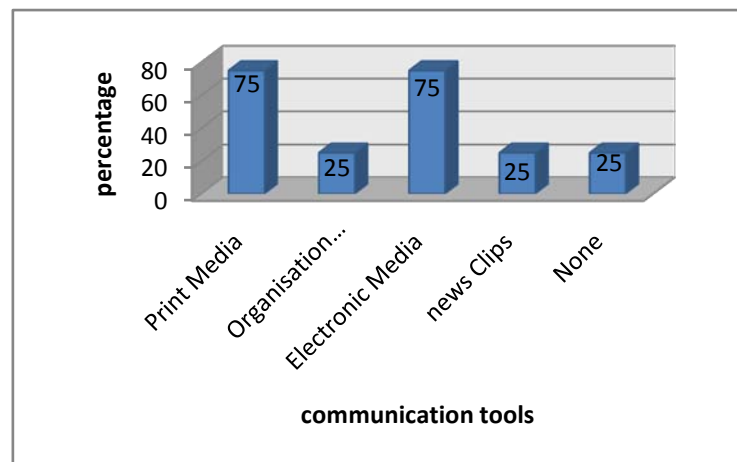


Figure 4.4: What tools are used for environmental scanning?

Interpretation

The responses received (figure 4.4) show that the respondents' understanding of the tools used for environmental scanning are similar to that identified by Choo (2001:1) such as news clips and the media. This finding shows that the majority of the respondents are using the correct tools for environmental scanning.

4.2.3 Issues management

1. Is issues management practised at your institution?

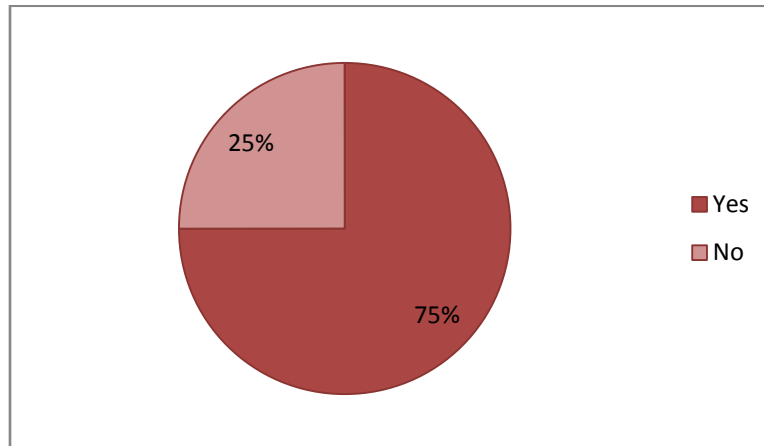


Figure 4.5: Is issues management practised at your institution?

Interpretation

Findings, as depicted in figure 4.5, reveal that the majority of the respondents (75%) are practising issues management. These findings confirm Skinner and Mersham's (2002: 16) statements. These authors explain that the central challenge for any organization is identifying future issues and responding to these issues using timely strategic responses. Therefore, issues management can be seen as an early warning process.

2. Are there any particular steps that you follow for issues management?

The majority of the respondents (75%) indicated that they were not aware of the steps that were followed during the issues management process. However, one respondent indicated that he was aware of the steps and went further on to stated that *"Yes, they are divided into 18 categories and each category is represented at the institutional forum"*.

Interpretation

The majority of the respondents have indicated that although they are aware that issues management is practised at their institutions, they are not sure of the steps that are followed or should be followed. One respondent indicated that issues management is divided in 18 categories. Skinner and Mersham (2002: 16) provide the following seven key steps that should be followed for issues:

- *Monitoring the business environment;*
- *Identifying important issues;*
- *Prioritizing important issue;*
- *Selecting and organizing key issues;*
- *Asking management to decide on a strategy;*
- *Implementing the programme; and*
- *Evaluating success and failure.*

It can, therefore, be concluded that the majority of respondents do not know the steps that are followed for issues management. Such ignorance could result in institutions not handling issues efficiently and effectively.

3. How are issues prioritized?

Two out of the four institutions (50%) have indicated that they are not aware of how issues are prioritized. 25% of the institutions stated that community issues take priority; however another 25% indicated that *“We look at issues that are more likely to affect us. Common ones are staff and student issues”*.

Interpretation

50% of the respondents have indicated that academic issues take priority. These responses are in line with the statements made by Louisiana State University (2007:1).

4. Do you think that there is a difference between an issue and a risk?

Institutions have indicated that:

“There is no difference between an issue and a risk;

Issues are problems that could occur whereas risk communication is the manner in which we communicate; and

Issues are matters that require immediate attention and everything is a risk”.

Interpretation

25% of the respondents indicated that an issue is a problem that requires immediate attention and everything is a risk. However, Skinner and Mersham (2002: 13) argue that issues management is an early warning process, whilst Wilcox and Cameron (2009: 260) refer to a risk as attempts to communicate. A few (25%) did not understand the difference between issues management and risk communication. 50% of the respondents answered in a similar manner to that of Skinner and Mersham and Wilcox and Cameron. These respondents understand the difference between issues management and risk communication.

4.2.4 Risk Communication

1. What do you understand by the term risk communication?

75% of the respondents have indicated that *“Risk communication involves communicating about a risk”*. 25 % of the respondents stated that *“Risk communication circulates around everything that is at risk, therefore the institutions infrastructure, personnel and students are at risk all the time. Communication plays a pivotal role to inform and educate communities”*.

Interpretation

The majority of the respondents indicated that risk communication involved communicating about a risk. Their responses are similar to that of Hill (2005:4). However, the responses make no mention of *management support, shared decision making and planning* which can be found in Hill's comments regarding risk communication.

2. How is effective risk communication practised at your institution?

50% of the respondents have indicated that they were not sure as to how effective risk communication is practised at their institutions. 25% of the respondents indicated that "*We ensure that risk communication is effective by communicating about a problem at an early stage*" whilst another 25% of the respondents stated that "*Communication should be a constant for effective risk management, we need to keep staff and students in the loop*".

Interpretation

A common word (i.e. communication) can be identified from 50% of the responses. Early and constant communication are two of the seven key principles that Hill (2005 4-7) has identified. Therefore, 50% of the respondents have an understanding of practising effective risk communication.

4.2.5 Crisis communication

1. How would you define a crisis?

Respondent one indicated that "*A crisis is any unexpected situation that could get out of hand*". Respondent two stated that "*A crisis is an element of conflict, something gone wrong or a grievance that has gotten out of control*". Respondent three indicated that "*A crisis is a problem that requires immediate attention*". Respondent four indicated that "*A crisis can be described as an activity that interrupts halts or hampers the function, operation of the organization*".

Interpretation

The findings reveal that the respondents' understanding of a crisis appears to be similar to Specht's (2005:1) definition of a crisis. Similar words in Specht's definition have been used by the respondents to define a crisis. Some of the words included an *unexpected situation, element of a conflict, problem that requires immediate attention and an activity that interrupts the function and operation of an agreement*. Based on this finding, it can be concluded that the respondents have an understanding of what a crisis entails.

2. Do you have a crisis team at your institution?

All respondents indicated "Yes" that they do have a crisis team at their institutions.

Interpretation

All of the respondents have indicated that they have a crisis team at their respective institutions. This finding which indicates that Wilcox and Cameron (2006; 258) are correct in stating that a crisis team is an essential component that is needed to assist in resolving the crisis.

3. Who are the members that form part of this team?

Respondent one stated that *"Depends on the crisis but would normally comprise of representatives from management, security, health and safety, corporate affairs, legal department, student counseling and student affairs"*. Respondent two explained that their crisis team members comprise of *"Management, the administrator of the institution and other representatives"*. Respondent three indicated that *"Council, management, human capital, SRC and labour movement compromise the team"* and respondent four stated that *"Members of corporate relations and members of risk management form part of our crisis team"*.

Interpretation

From the responses received, the following common terms were used by members of the crisis teams:

- *Top Management;*
- *Corporate affairs;*
- *Student representatives;*
- *Trade unions; and*
- *Risk management/security.*

These words tie in with Specht's (2005: 2) recommendation of members that should form part of a crisis team.

4. Have you predicted a list of crises that can occur at your institution?

All institutions indicated that they do have a list of crises that can occur at their institutions. Common crises that are experienced across all institutions are staff and student protests.

Interpretation

All respondents responded in a similar manner as they all have a list of crises that could occur at their institutions. This finding is in support to Barton's (2008: 107) statements that crisis management requires advance planning, training, as well as prepared plans, and a list of crises that shows that the organization is being proactive in planning for these crises.

5. Examples of crises that can occur

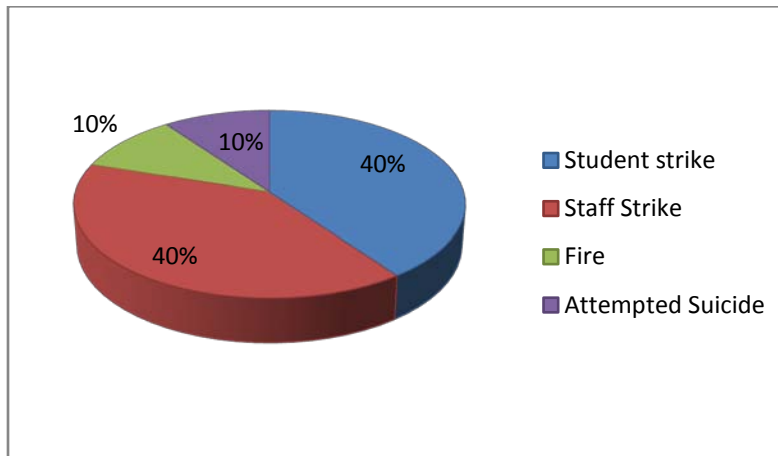


Figure 4.6: Examples of crises that can occur

Interpretation

Figure 4.6 describes the interviewees' responses regarding crises that they have experienced. The responses received showed that students and staff strikes are the most common forms of crises that higher education institutions experience. This finding is confirmed by the Louisiana State University (2007:1).

6. How did your institutions handle these crises?

Respondent one explained that they were responsible for the communication aspect and further explained the manner in which they communicate. Respondent two stated that *"Meetings are called and a mediator is also called in to resolve the crisis"*. Respondents three and four had similar comments as they stated that meetings are held with the relevant stakeholders to resolve the crisis.

Interpretation

Similar responses were received from 75% of the interviewees. The common link between the responses was that meetings are held with the relevant stakeholders so that negotiations can be reached. Luecke (2004:660) and Ulmer *et al.* (2007: 76) agree with these statements as relevant stakeholders would have to meet to discuss the crisis at hand. 25% of the interviewees stated that his institution used a mediator to assist in resolving the crisis. Lube and Puth (2000:216) recommend that top management and stakeholders within the organization resolve the crisis. Hence, the empirical finding conflicts with the finding in relevant literature. Interviewee one further elaborated in his/her response by discussing communication. Effective communication is highlighted as important in Ulmer (2007:57).

7. What are some of the challenges that an institution has to deal with in resolving the crisis?

75% of the respondents have indicated that dealing with students is always a problem. 25% of the respondents indicated that *“Any crisis is a challenge. The people involved in the handling the crisis may not have the necessary negotiating skills. An outside mediator is called in and this takes time”*. 25% of the respondents indicated that some problems can only be solved by top management.

Interpretation

Two interviewees responded that communication is a problem during a crisis. This finding confirms the view of Tench and Yeoman (2006:399) who explain that whilst communication is important in the midst of a crisis, miscommunication and lack of understanding can be caused. One of the interviewees believes that people lack the necessary skills for handling a crisis. This finding opposes the view of Wilcox and Cameron (2009: 247) who state that public relations practitioners should have the necessary knowledge and are responsible for handling all crisis situations.

8. Does your organization have a crisis plan?

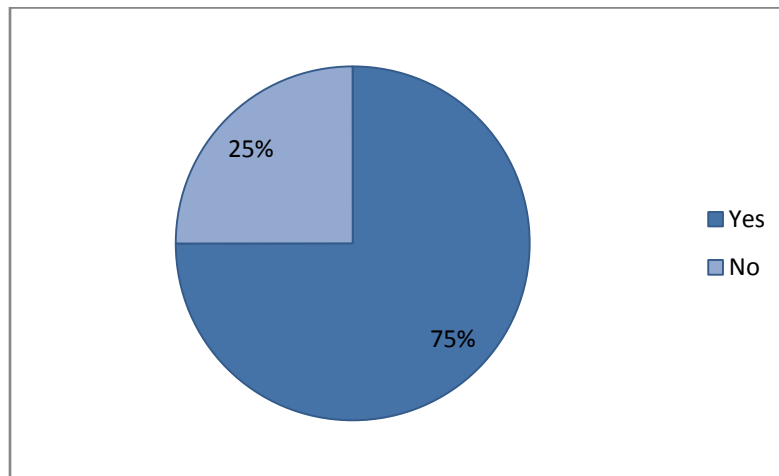


Figure 4.7: Does your organization have a crisis plan?

Interpretation

The majority of the respondents, as shown in figure 4.7, indicated that their institutions did have a crisis plan whilst one institution stated that his institution did not have a crisis plan. Lubbe and Puth (2000:216) recommend that all organizations have a crisis plan in place as this plan is responsible for the organization successfully resolving the crisis. It also shows that an organization is being proactive. It is encouraging to note that 75% of the institutions are aware of the importance of having such a plan.

9. What are the components that make up this plan?

One respondent believes that the plan should contain media techniques. Respondent two indicated that his/her institution did not have a crisis plan as yet but media techniques are important. Respondent three stated that *“The components in our plan include crisis management, insurance management, response management, risk management and student*

management", whilst respondent four indicated that he/she could not disclose any information about the plan as it is confidential.

Interpretation

Varied responses were received. Respondents three's statement is similar to Specht's (2005: 1) elements of a crisis. The importance of responding and communicating is explained under the element *what to do during a crisis*. Another institution based their responses on a crisis plan containing media techniques. The institutions that did not have a crisis plan also believed that when their plan comes into place it should contain media techniques. Maintaining constant media relations is a constant process and should not only be employed during a crisis (Lukaszewski, 2001). One institution failed to comment. It can, therefore, be said that 3 institutions have some idea as to what a crisis plan entails.

10. Does the organization have a spokesperson?

All respondents (100%) have indicated that they do have spokespersons. All respondents are aware of whom their spokesperson is.

Interpretation

All the interviewees have indicated that they have a spokesperson at their respective institutions and they are aware as to who their spokesperson is and the importance of having a spokesperson. This confirms Specht's (2005:22) views as he believes that the spokesperson plays an important role during a crisis as he/she will be responding and representing his/her organization.

11. Is the spokesperson prepared to respond to requests for information and interviews?

All respondents (100%) indicated that their spokespersons are always prepared to respond to requests for information and interviews.

Interpretation

It was noted that there is uniformity in the responses received. It can, therefore, be said that the respondents are aware of the role that the spokesperson plays during a crisis.

12. Who is the spokesperson's back-up in case he/she is not available?

75% of the respondents have indicated that their institutions have a back-up spokesperson and are aware of whom this person is. 25% of the respondent stated that his/her institution does not have a back-up spokesperson as their spokesperson is always available.

Interpretation

75% of the institutions are aware of whom their back-up spokesperson is. However, 25% of the respondents indicated that he/she does not have a back-up spokesperson as their spokesperson is always available. Ulmer (2007:79) indicates that a back-up spokesperson should be indicated as a precautionary measure.

13. Internal and external communication methods used

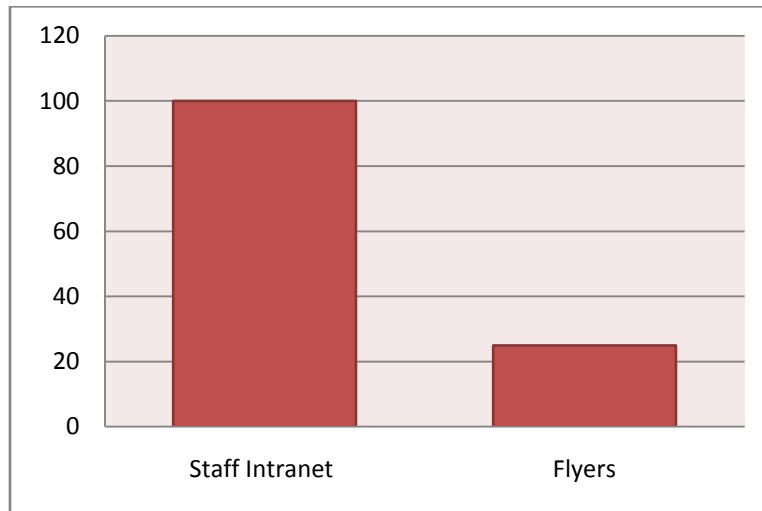


Figure 4.8: Internal communication methods used

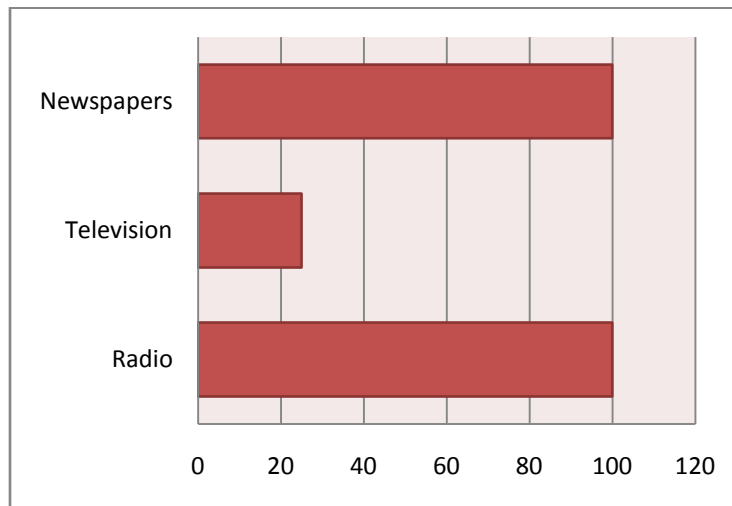


Figure 4.9: External communication methods used

Interpretation

All respondents indicated that they use the print and the electronic media to communicate to the internal and external public. The majority of the respondents, as indicated in figure 4.8, stated that communicating via the staff intranets is an effective method of communicating internally for them. This finding is supported by Zappala and Carden (2004: 280) who state that websites can be used as a means of communication.

Respondents further indicated that the external stakeholders are communicated via newspapers, radio and one respondent mentioned the television (figure 4.9). This finding indicates evidence that the respondents are aware of the various communication methods that their institutions use.

14. Are communication techniques effective during a crisis?

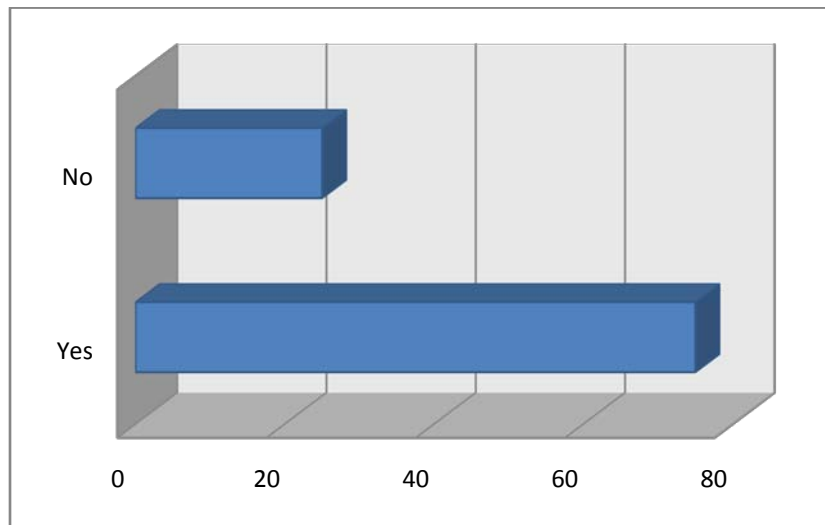


Figure 4.10: Are communication techniques effective during a crisis?

Interpretation

Figure 4.10 shows that 75% of the respondents believe that their communication methods are effective whilst one institution states that it may not always be effective due to media representatives having tight deadlines to meet. Zappala and Carden (2004: 280) confirm that communication should be a constant factor during a crisis. Skinner *et al.* (2004: 288) maintain that an organization should be prepared to seize early communication initiatives and to establish the organization as the only source of information.

15. Do you think greater problems are created by not taking action immediately?

All respondents agreed that action should be taken immediately during the crisis. Respondent one further explained why, at times, action may not be taken immediately and stated the following *“If it requires immediate action, we do so. Sometimes we need to gather more information before communicating as incorrect information may have been given to us. There are also times when a certain situation has to be handled in a certain way. We have to work with the sectors concerned and go with their recommendations in terms of communication”*.

Interpretation

The responses show that all interviewees agree that action should be immediately taken when a crisis arises. However, one institution indicated that action cannot be taken immediately and provided reasons. Tench and Yeoman (2006:398) as well as Skinner and Mersham (2002: 24) confirm that, during a crisis, action should be taken immediately so that the crisis may be resolved as soon as possible without causing much harm to the organization.

16. Are there any compelling reasons for information not being immediately released after it has been gathered?

All respondents provided reasons as to why information may not be immediately released after it has been gathered. Some of the reasons were:

*“Large number of staff and students to communicate with;
The crisis could contain private, legal or health issues; and
Negotiations between parties could cause delays”*.

Interpretation

Two respondents indicated that an issue that may have legal or health implications is not disclosed. Two other respondents indicated that mediation/negotiations could be deadlocked

and information would not be released. Trench and Yeoman (2006:403) provide a list of reasons why organizations do not communicate. This list includes aspects of negotiation, mediation and communication.

17. Has a crisis ever occurred in the past that you can learn from?

All respondents agreed that after every crisis there is something to be learnt.

Interpretation

All respondents agree that every crisis is a learning experience. Trench and Yeoman (2006: 399) refer to the learning stage in the five stages of a crisis, which includes conducting a post incidental analysis.

18. Is the crisis plan improved upon after a crisis?

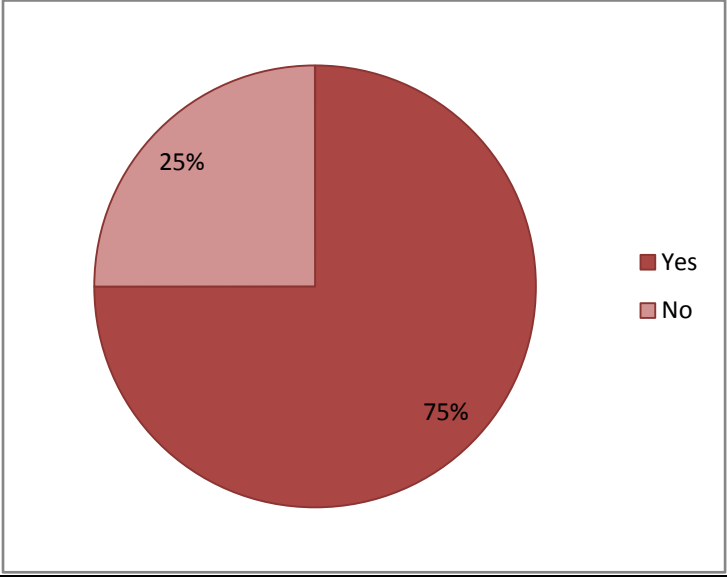


Figure 4.11: Is the crisis plan improved upon after a crisis?

Interpretation

The majority of the respondents, as indicated in figure 4.11, stated that their crisis plan is revised after every crisis. This finding is supported by Fernandez and Merzer (2005; 213) who agree with the respondents that it is important that the crisis plan is updated. This allows for the old plan to be reviewed and improvements to be made. The update ensures that the organization is once again being proactive. One respondent indicated that his/her institution does not have a plan. However, Center *et al.* (2008: 628) provide strong arguments stating the importance of having a crisis plan and how an organization benefits from such a plan.

4.3 Report and analysis of interview schedule administered to the media officers

4.3.1 Media and communication

1. Does the organization have a spokesperson?

All respondents (100%) indicated who their spokesperson is.

Interpretation

All respondents indicated that that they do have a spokesperson and are aware of whom their spokesperson is. The responses are in line with Specht's (2005: 2) statements regarding the role that the spokesperson plays during a crisis.

2. Describe the role that the media plays during a crisis?

All respondents indicated that the media plays an important informative and communicative role during a crisis. One respondent also mentioned that, the media, which plays an informative role, they can also be associated with sensationalism.

Interpretation

All respondents agreed that the media plays an important informative role during a crisis. Similar statements have been made by Wilcox and Cameron (2009: 261). Common words used by the authors and the respondents are:

Inform;

Communicate; and

Shape perceptions.

This finding shows that the media officers understand the role of the media.

3. External communication tools used

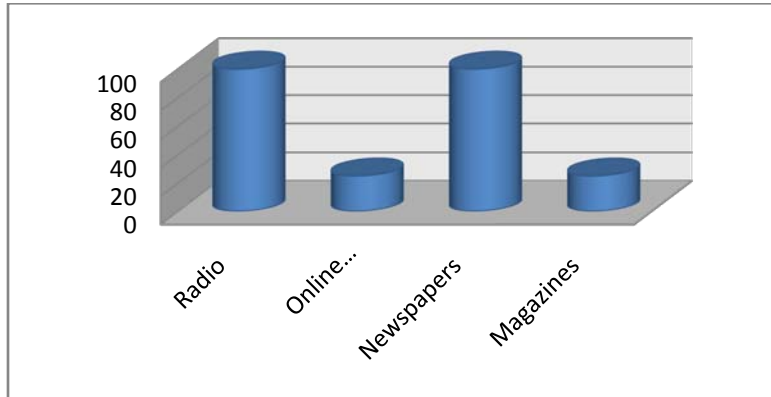


Figure 4.12: External communication tools used

Interpretation

The above graph (figure 4.12) highlights the external communication tools that are used. All respondents stated that both the print and electronic media were used. Findings revealed that the radio and the newspapers are the common external communication tools that are used. This finding confirms Wilcox and Cameron's (2009: 261) perceptions that communication is an important factor during a crisis.

4. Internal communication tools used

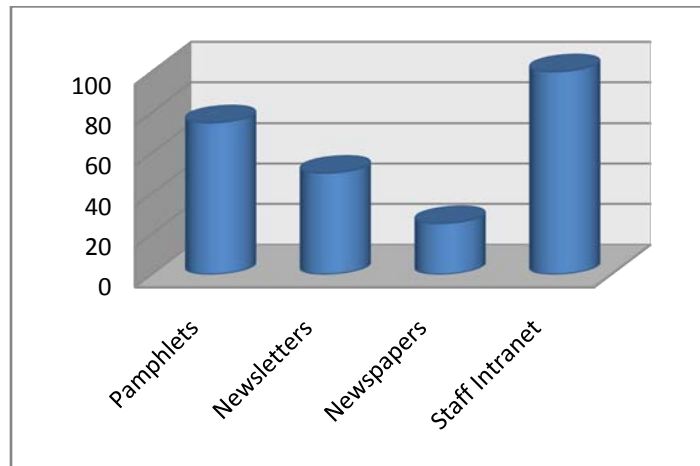


Figure 4.13: Internal communication tools used

Interpretation

The above graph (Figure 4.13) highlights the internal communication tools that are used. All respondents stated that both the print and electronic media were used. Responses show that using the print media, pamphlets are commonly used to communicate at three of the selected institutions. All respondents further indicated that the staff intranet is the most important means of communication during a crisis. This finding confirms Zappala and Carden's (2004: 280) views relating to the use of the staff intranet (websites) as a means of communication during a crisis.

5. Do you already have a database of contacts at the selected media?

Respondent one stated that *"We have a database of over 100 media contacts country wide and abroad. We also have a database of our specialist reporters such as sport writers, arts and fashion and education writers"*. Respondent two stated that *"Yes we have a database. We most commonly use the Isolozwe and Illanga"*. Respondent three explained that *"We have a wide network and we have a media list booklet which we have compiled as we are an academic institution"*, whilst the last respondent indicated that they have contacts from both the print and electronic media.

Interpretation

The findings reveal that all respondents have a database of media contacts. This finding confirms Lukaszweski's (2001:1) comments that a media list should be prepared, constant contact should be made with the media and organizations should establish trustworthy relationships with the media. All respondents indicated that they have a list of media contacts. Therefore, it can be said that all respondents understand the importance of having such a list.

6. How much information can and should be released to the media during a crisis?

50% of the respondents explained that they await management approval of the information before it can be released. 25% of the respondents stated that the issues could be of a sensitive nature and could result in limited information being released. Another 25% of the respondents indicated that research has to be done before any information can be released so that factual information is being given to the media.

Interpretation

The responses received show that the interviewees have an understanding of when information pertaining to the crisis should be released and when information cannot be released. Similar comments have been made by Leuke (2005: 81) and Tench and Yeoman (2006:403). They provide the following recommendations for communicating to the media:

- *Give facts;*
- *Be honest;*
- *Be candid; and*
- *Don't speculate.*

7. Do you think that the media coverage is fair and accurate?

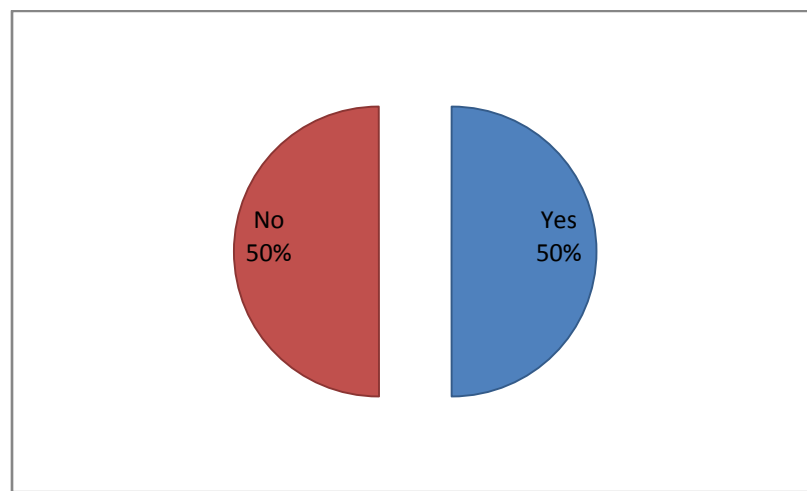


Figure 4.14: Do you think that the media coverage is fair and accurate?

Interpretation

The above figure (4.14) shows that 50% of the respondents agreed that the media reports are accurate. However, the other 50% of the respondents felt that the media reports are not accurate and that the media focuses on sensationalism. Both responses can be seen as correct as Leucke (2005: 81) mentions that the media should be given facts at the beginning and throughout the crisis, Leucke also mentions that, when the media is not given any information they look to less credible sources to receive them.

8. Do their stories report on the positive steps taken as well as the negative elements in the crisis?

Respondent one indicated that *“Media all over the world do not do PR for anybody but they are sensational and usually focus on the negative aspects. But if the news is really good they report it. It depends on their news judgment”*. Respondent two indicated that *“You can’t control what the media reports. When the media reports on negative issues, the organization should deal with it by correcting it and thereafter sending out positive stories”*. Respondent three stated that *“The media will report on what is being given both positively and negatively”* and the final respondent stated *“No”*.

Interpretation

50% of the respondents indicated that if facts are given to the media they leave no room for confusion. The other 50% of the respondents stated that if the media reports incorrectly, they should be contacted and the information should be immediately corrected. These statements are supported by Zappala and Carden (2004: 280) who mention that the media should be monitored and any errors should be reported and corrected. It can, therefore, be said that the respondents understand how to handle the media.

4.4 **Conclusion**

This chapter has analyzed and discussed the findings of the empirical study. Results have revealed that the communication officers have a basic understanding of strategic planning. However, their understanding of issues management and risk communication seems to be limited. All higher education institutions have agreed that a crisis can have drastic consequences on any institution. Therefore, it is essential that all institutions have a crisis communication plan. All media officers have agreed that communication is an important element during a crisis. The next chapter sets out to provide recommendations as to how higher education institutions can improve their planning and management of crisis communication.

CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Introduction

The previous chapter analyzed and interpreted the results obtained from the empirical study. This chapter sets out to discuss a summary of the findings and offers recommendations to improve the planning and management of crisis communication at higher education institutions in KwaZulu-Natal.

5.2 Summary of Findings

An empirical investigation was conducted at four higher education institutions within KwaZulu-Natal using an interview schedule. The following is a brief summary of the findings.

5.2.1 Strategic planning and strategic conflict management

Results have shown that respondents were aware of what a strategic plan is and the majority of the institutions have a strategic plan. This plan includes the management of conflict. Most of the institutions also conduct environmental scanning. Common tools for this process were the use of the print and electronic media.

5.2.2 Issues management and risk communication

The majority of the respondents are aware of what issues management entails, and stated that their respective institutions are practising issues management. However, respondents were not aware of the steps that are used to conduct issues management. Similar responses were

received to the questions based on risk communication, as respondents indicated that risk communication is practised but were not aware of the process that was followed.

5.2.3 Crisis communication

All respondents were aware of what a crisis is, what it entails and the disastrous effects that it can have on any institution. It was noted that the majority of the institutions have a crisis communications plan as well as a crisis team. It was also noted that some institutions rely on assistance from people outside the institution to assist in resolving the crisis. All respondents have agreed that every crisis has important lessons that can be learnt.

5.2.4 Media and communication

All media officers were aware of who their spokesperson is. They were also aware of the role that spokesperson plays during a crisis. The majority of the respondents agreed that the media plays an “informative” role. The radio and newspapers were seen as the main means of external communication, whilst the staff intranet and e-mail system are used to communicate externally. All institutions have a data base of media contacts which assists them in making contact and communicating to target publics.

5.3 Conclusions to the study based on the objectives

The following section presents the conclusions to the study based on the objectives:

1. To evaluate the crisis plan at higher education institutions in KwaZulu-Natal

A crisis communication plan can be described as a process whereby a possible disaster is identified and the consequences are worked through. Organizations need to be prepared or have done some preparation that covers all the basis of a potential crisis (Lubbe and Puth, 2000: 216). This statement highlights the importance of having a crisis

plan at any organization and institution. The results of the study indicate that the majority (75%) of the respondents have a crisis communication plan at their organizations. Therefore, the first objective has been achieved.

2. To evaluate the role that communication plays in this plan

Communication can be regarded as a pre-planned necessity that plays a key role in the crisis communication plan. Respondents have indicated that during a crisis, the print media as well as the electronic media are effectively used. Therefore, this objective has been achieved.

3. To assess the role of communication during post-crisis evaluation

Once the crisis is over, a post-incident analysis should be conducted. The majority of the respondents (75%) indicated they conduct a post-crisis evaluation.

5.4 Recommendations

The following are recommendations that the researcher believes can assist institutions in proactively planning and managing for a crisis.

5.4.1 Strategic conflict management should be considered a priority

The main purpose of strategic conflict management is to develop strategies and processes. These strategies and processes can influence the cause of conflicts, thereby benefiting the organization (Wilcox and Cameron, 2009:245). By developing strategies and processes, organizational goals can be accomplished and problems can be solved. Although the majority of the respondents indicated that they did have strategic plans, which included strategic conflict management, this step should not be taken lightly and should be made a priority. Evidence is provided by Plowman (2005; 131), who explains that strategic conflict management begins with

identifying problems. Therefore, if potential problems are identified at an early stage, they may reduce the damage caused to the institution by the crisis.

5.4.2 Issues management should be conducted in a more strategic manner so that risks can be identified and planned for

Issues management refers to the proactive approach that is used to predict problems, anticipate threats, minimize surprises, resolve issues and try to prevent crises (Wilcox and Cameron, 2009:256). This definition highlights the important role that issues management plays in any institution. Respondents have indicated that their institutions do practice issues management but they are not aware of the steps that should be followed for issues management. This finding gives the impression that certain institutions are reactive when it comes to dealing with issues management. Being reactive can cause an institutions not watching out for early warning signs and this may result in them not being properly prepared for the impending crisis. Therefore issues management should be conducted in a more strategic manner so that risks can be identified.

5.4.3 Lack of understanding of risk communication

Skinner and Mersham (2002: 18) define risk communication as the two-way exchange of information between parties in order to make decisions about how best to manage a risk. Respondents have indicated that risk communication “involves communication”. Respondents were unaware of the steps that should be followed for risk communication. This finding gives the impression that the respondents have a lack of understanding of what risk communication is and how it should be carried out. The importance of risk communication is that it puts the organization in a favourable position and it influences that behaviour of the organization favourably (Wilcox and Cameron, 2009: 260). By institutions practising risk communication, they are able to show their stakeholders as well as the public that they are constantly alert and prepared in identifying issues, developing strategies and maintaining media contact.

5.4.4 Having a pre-planned crisis plan for common crises

Results have revealed that common crises experienced across all higher education institutions are strikes (staff and student). It is recommended that, as this is a common and recurring crisis, institutions have a pre-planned crisis plan that comes into effect when this particular crisis starts. Consequently, by doing so institutions will have planned a process of working through this crisis and effectively managing it.

5.4.5 More instantaneous communication tools should be used

During a crisis, internal and external stakeholders, students, staff members and even the general public constantly require updated and clearer communication. During a crisis, communication is often distorted or cut off entirely. Therefore, institutions should adopt more instant communication tools such as the bulk sms systems which can alleviate the problem of target publics looking at less credible or unauthentic sources for updated information.

5.4.6 Components that make up the crisis plan

Tench and Yeoman (2006: 398) provide five simple steps which form the components of a crisis communication plan. These steps are *Detection, Prevention, Containment, Recovery and Learning*. The five steps take one through to the different processes and stages that a crisis passes. The majority of the respondents have indicated that they do have a crisis communication plan at their institutions. However, from the responses received, it seems that the institutions' crisis plans focus more on media techniques. It is, therefore, recommended that the five steps of a crisis plan be incorporated into the higher education institutions.

5.4.7 Large number of staff members and students as well as multi campuses create additional challenges for communication

Most of the higher education institutions that have featured in this study have multi campuses. This poses an additional communication problem, as communication may have to be sent out to three or even four campuses. Communication could be delayed or incorrectly interpreted and could cause additional problems for that institution. Due to the large number of students health issues could also a problem. It is recommended that a plan of action be sought to address these issues.

5.4.8 Members that form the crisis communications team

The crisis management team plays a key role during a crisis. The members of this team should come from within the organization. By doing so, the onsite crisis communication team would be able to manage and implement communications so that the crisis is contained. Findings have revealed that some institutions have an external mediator when a crisis occurs. A crisis is an unexpected or sudden situation that has to be dealt with immediately. Contacting a mediator may take time and the crisis may get out of hand. Therefore, it is recommended that the crisis management team be formed with members from within the organizations.

5.4.9 Training of the crisis communications team

Findings revealed that some institutions believe that their crisis management team is ill equipped and not adequately trained to deal with the crisis. The crisis management team is responsible for the immediate “hands on” operational response during the crisis. Therefore, it is essential that the members of this team be given specific duties and be trained so that they can successfully carry out those duties. It is recommended that the crisis management teams be trained for the necessary role that they will be fulfilling so that the crisis can be dealt within a swift and efficient manner.

5.4.10 Communicating with the media

Communicating with the media during a crisis is important, as the internal and external stakeholders look to the media as a source of information and as a source of continual updates regarding the crisis. Corrigan and Mortensen (2006: 16) explain that there are two types of media coverage which are:

- The instantaneous media that prefer to air a story before collecting the facts and
- A more professional media that collects the story and checks facts before going public

It is recommended that the media should be provided with the truth regarding the crisis. Moreover, healthy relations should be maintained with the media.

5.5 Recommendations for further research

This study was limited to four higher education institutions within KwaZulu-Natal. Both communication officers as well as media officers were interviewed. It is recommended that further research be done comparing the manner in which private higher education institutions plan and manage for any crisis with that of the public higher education institutions. Furthermore, the researcher should also obtain the views and comments from students as well as other staff members at the higher education institutions.

5.6 Concluding Remarks

This study has highlighted the importance of planning and managing for any crisis that may occur. It has specifically looked at public higher education institutions within KwaZulu-Natal. Literature has revealed the importance of all higher education institutions having a crisis communication plan at their institutions and it has also shown the repercussions of not having such a plan. The empirical data used for this study was based on an interview schedule that was administered to the communication officers and media officers at four public higher education institutions in KwaZulu-Natal. The recommendations discussed in this chapter are just a few actions that can assist higher education institutions in better planning and managing for a crisis.

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Annexure One

Sameera Hussain

Cell: 079 434 2051

E-mail:

Sameera.hussain@yahoo.co
m

45 Road 734

Montford

Chatsworth

Durban

4092

13 March 2009

Dear Sir/Madam

Re: Postgraduate study in Masters of Technology

I am currently an M-Tech student at the Durban University of Technology – student number 20506945. My research topic is “Planning and Management of Crisis Communication at Higher Education Institutions in KwaZulu-Natal”. My supervisor is Dr V. P Rawjee, lecturer in the Department of Marketing, Retail and Public Relations at the Durban University of Technology.

This study sets out to explore how crisis communication is planned and managed at higher education institutions in KwaZulu-Natal. To complete my study, I require 30 minutes of your time to conduct an interview with you regarding crisis communication at your institution. You are given the assurance by the researcher that your responses will be confined to the use of this study and confidentiality will be strictly observed at all times. Should you have any queries, please contact me. I would like to thank you for your time and assistance in this regard.

Yours Sincerely

Sameera Hussain

Letter of Consent: Durban University of Technology

Sameera Banu Hussain

From: Raylene Juanita Captain-Hasthibeer
Sent: Tuesday, April 07, 2009 3:30 PM
To: Sameera Banu Hussain
Cc: Nkosinathi Bhekani Dlamini
Subject: RE: Assistance Required

Hello Sameera

Ok, let me know when you would like to do the interview. It's fine, Bhekani can speak with you.

Regards,
Raylene

From: Sameera Banu Hussain
Sent: Friday, April 03, 2009 8:08 AM
To: Raylene Juanita Captain-Hasthibeer
Subject: RE: Assistance Required

Thank you

I really appreciate it, The interview will be conducted during the later part of the year.

I also require an interview from Mr Dlamini and he has suggested that i ask you for permission for an interview from him. would you be able to assist with this? it is not that urgent you can respond when you return from your leave.

From: Raylene Juanita Captain-Hasthibeer
Sent: Friday, April 03, 2009 8:05 AM
To: Sameera Banu Hussain
Subject: RE: Assistance Required

Hello Sameera

No problem. I am on leave right now so will get back to you next week.

Regards,
Raylene

From: Sameera Banu Hussain
Sent: Friday, April 03, 2009 7:25 AM
To: Raylene Juanita Captain-Hasthibeer
Subject: Assistance Required

Hi Raylene

I am not sure if you recall but around mid last year you had assisted me with my Btech research by granting me an interview regarding crisis communication at DUT.

This year i have registered for my Mtech and I am continuing with my topic would it be possible for you to assist me yet again by granting me an interview, it will be along the same lines as last years.

Regards
Sameera

Annexure three

Letter of consent: University of KwaZulu-Natal

Sameera Banu Hussain

From: Smita Maharaj [Maharajsm@ukzn.ac.za]
Sent: Wednesday, May 06, 2009 12:52 PM
To: Sameera Banu Hussain
Subject: Re: FW: Assistance Required

Dear Sameera

I do apologise - I had asked a colleague to meet with you as my schedule is rather hectic in April. However, I can meet with you on Monday 11 May at 10h00.

Best regards
Smita

From: Sameera Banu Hussain
Sent: Tuesday, March 31, 2009 3:42 PM
To: maharajsm@ukzn.ac.za
Subject: Assistance Required

Good Afternoon Ms Maharaj

I am Sameera Hussain and currently completing my Mtech in public relation management at the Durban university of technology. the title of my research project is *The planning and management of crisis communication at higher education institution in KZN*. in order for me to complete my research I require 30 min of your time to conduct an interview relating to how crisis communication is planned and managed at your institution.

Any assistance that you can afford me will be highly appreciated.

Regards
Sameera Hussain.

"This e-mail is subject to our Disclaimer, to view click <http://www.dut.ac.za>"

Please find our Email Disclaimer here-->: <http://www.ukzn.ac.za/disclaimer>

Letter of consent: Mangosuthu University of Technology

Sameera Banu Hussain

From: Anette Mienie [Anette@mut.ac.za]
Sent: Monday, May 18, 2009 12:20 PM
To: Sameera Banu Hussain
Cc: SANELE.Staff.MUT@mut.ac.za
Subject: RE: Assistance required

Dear Ms. Hussain,

Please be advised that permission is granted to do research, as outlined in your proposal, at Mangosuthu University of Technology.

Good luck with your research.

Dr. Anette Mienie

From: Anette Mienie [Anette@mut.ac.za]
Sent: Tuesday, April 14, 2009 9:01 AM
To: Sameera Banu Hussain
Subject: Re: Assistance required

Dear Ms. Hussain,

Thank you for your interest in MUT. I have asked our Marketing and Communications Department whether they will be available for an interview. In addition to their availability we would need your project proposal, questionnaire and ethical clearance for consideration before permission to do the research may be considered.

Good Morning Dr Mescht

I am Sameera Hussain from the Durban University of Technology. I am currently doing my Mtech in Public Relations Management and the title of my Thesis is The Planning and Management of Crisis Communication at HEI's in KZN.

My supervisor has asked me to include 4 HEI's in my research., and I would like to include MUT in my study. Please may I have some assistance all I require is an interview with the communications officer and the media officer or someone that deals with crisis at your institution.

Any assistance that you can afford me will be highly appreciated.

Regards
Sameera Hussain

Letter of consent: University of Zululand

Sameera Banu Hussain

From: Thabo Leshoro (PRISA-PRP) [tleshoro@pan.uzulu.ac.za]
Sent: Tuesday, March 31, 2009 4:18 PM
To: Sameera Banu Hussain
Subject: Re: Assistance Required
Attachments: tleshoro.vcf

Sameera Banu Hussain wrote:
Good Afternoon Mr Leshoro

I am Sameera Hussain and currently doing my Mtech in Public Relations Management. the topic of my research project is *The Planning and Management of Crisis communication at Higher Education Institutions*. in order fo me to complete my research I require 30 min of your time to conduct an interview regarding crisis communication at your institution.

Any assistance that you can afford in this matter is highly appreciated.

Regards
Sameera Hussain

"This e-mail is subject to our Disclaimer, to view click <http://www.dut.ac.za>"
Sameera,

I do not mind an interview but it must during my rightful frame of mind. Is it a verbal or written interview? I will be comfortable in the morning between 08:00 and 09:00.

Regards
Thabo

Interview Schedule: Communication Officer

1. Strategic Planning

1.1 Does your organization have a strategic plan?

- Yes
- No

1.2 Does it address the management of a conflict?

- Yes
- No

2. Strategic conflict Management

2.1 Does your Institution conduct environmental scanning?

- Yes
- No

2.2 If yes, what communication tools are used:

- Media (print and electronic).
- News clips.
- Organizational networks.
- Market research.
- Other

3. Issues management

3.1 Is issues management practised at your institution?

3.2 Are there any particular steps that you follow for issues management?

3.3 How are issues prioritized?

3.4 Do you think that there is a difference between an issue and a risk?

4. Risk management

4.1 What do you understand by the term risk communication?

4.2 How is effective risk communication practiced?

5. Crisis communication

5.1 How would you define a crisis?

5.2 Do you have an established crisis communication team at your institution?

5.3 Who are the members that form part of this team?

5.4 Have you predicted a list of crises that can occur at your institution?

If yes – how would you respond to them?

If no, Why?

5.5 Can you name a few examples of crises that have occurred at your institution?

5.6 How did your institution handle these crises?

5.7 What are some of the challenges that an institution has to deal with in resolving the crisis?

5.8 Does your organization have a crisis communication plan in place?

5.9 What are the components that make up this plan?

5.10 Who is the official spokesperson at the institution?

5.11 Is he/she prepared to respond to requests for information and interviews?

5.12 Who is the spokesperson back-up in case he/she is not available?

5.13 What channels of communication are used to communicate with internal and external stakeholders in the advent of a crisis?

5.14 Do you think communication techniques are effective during this time? Explain

5.15 Do you think that greater problems are created by not taking action immediately? Explain

5.16 Are there any compelling reasons for the information not to be immediately released after it has been gathered? Explain

5.17 Has a crisis ever occurred in the past that you can learn from? Explain

5.18 Is the crisis communication plan improved upon after a crisis? Explain

Interview Schedule 2: Media officer

1. Media and Communication

1.1 Who is the official spokesperson at the institution?

1.2 Describe the role that the media plays during a crisis.

1.3 Does the institution use the print media or electronic to communicate to the external stakeholders?

1.3.1 If print media: explain your choice

- Newspapers
- Magazines
- Other

1.3.2 If electronic media: explain your choice

- Online Newspapers
- Radio
- Television
- Other

1.4 What channels of communication are used to communicate with the internal stakeholders?

1.4.1 If print media: explain your choice

- Newsletters
- Pamphlets
- Other

1.4.2 If electronic media: explain your choice

- Internal E-mails
- University Radio
- Other

1.5 Do you already have a database of contacts at the selected media?

1.6 How much information can and should be released to the media during a crisis?

1.7 When monitoring the media coverage during the crisis, do you think that their stories are fair and accurate?

1.8 Do their stories report on the positive steps taken as well as the negative elements in the crisis