Situational Crisis Communication Theory and How Sports Organizations Blindly Supporting and Defending their Athletes and Staff Negatively Affects the Crisis Situation

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Introduction

Research in European countries shows that 70 percent of communication professionals will have to handle at least one crisis each year (Verhoeven, 2013). In the age of social media and with the development of new technology, crisis is inevitable. Within 24 hours, a crisis can spread internationally thanks to new technology today, therefore, responding to crisis is crucial when it comes to salvaging a company's reputation.

As technology continues to develop and communication begins to play a more vital role to companies, studies have been conducted and suggest that there has been a rise in the number of companies that have allotted an amount in their corporate communications budget specifically for media relations, crisis communications and overall corporate identity (Hutton, 2001). As crisis communication becomes more and more important for companies around the world, crisis response becomes more of a science and a formula of what to say and do and what not to say and what not to do.

Sports organizations have a lot to consider when they fall into a crisis. When it comes to negative events and publicity surrounding professional athletes and their organizations, not only are consumer attitudes towards the athlete impacted but so are their views towards the athletes sponsors (Till and Shimp, 1998; White, 2009). Therefore, taking as much blame off the athlete seems like the right option for sports organizations. By defending their athletes and their staff, they are protecting the image of their athlete and of their sponsors, both vital parts of every sports organization. In addition, positive publicity does not have as strong affect on consumers as does negative publicity. (Fiske, 1980; Ito, 1998; Baumeister, 2001). This means that not only is providing positive information regularly important but avoiding the negative publicity as much as possible is a huge goal for organizations in general.

The Houston Astros have faced some crisis the past couple weeks. When assistant General Manager (GM) screamed at three female reports, the Astros refused to comment or make the GM available for interview, defending him by doing nothing. The Astros then continued to defend its GM by releasing a statement denying the situation, blaming Sports Illustrated for posting a "misleading" story. This blind defense of their assistant GM, even though the situation did happen and was true, led to the Astros being slammed on social media and eventually forced their hand into firing their assistant GM, despite their original claims of falsehood of the incident. The Astros blindly defending their staff led them into a deeper crisis than they were originally in and led to them trending in world news and on social media and not in a good way.

This practice of defending star players and key staff in the sports world has become routine. The deeper an organization falls into a crisis; the more consumers place responsibility for the crisis on the organization and the more negative effect the crisis will have on the organization. For example, the Astros are now being watched closely and are now being investigated for stealing signs.

The goal of this study is to investigate how continued use of denial in the situational crisis communication theory model by sports organizations along with the blind defense of a sports organizations athletes and staff negatively impacts the crisis and leads to higher levels attribution of responsibility of those crises and therefore places those organizations into a position of higher reputational threat.

Research into crisis response strategies for every organization is important, but when it comes to sports, your athletes and your staff team are your whole brand. Your image relies on them building and maintaining their image. Therefore, research into the way that sports organizations respond to crisis when it comes to athletes and their staff negatively impacting their

organizations reputation is vital. In several studies, it has been found that the mortification strategy works the best when it comes to recovering a negative perception of athletes while attacking the accuser was the second most effective and bolstering was the least effective (Brown, 2014). This does not answer the question of which strategies these sports organizations are really using. In recent events, sports organizations seem to be defending their athletes and staff before looking into the issue any further or doing any sort of investigation of their own. This blind defense and denial could make the crisis worse depending on the amount of responsibility the consumer then places on sports organization sparking a new need to look into how the aspects of the situational crisis communication theory impact each other when used in this way in various sports organizations.

Literature Review

What is a Crisis?

Crisis can be a variety of problems and is relative to the organization it is happening to. In the communication world, crisis can be defined as sudden and unexpected event that threatens to disrupt an organizations operation and poses both a financial and a reputational threat (Coombs, 2007). Crisis most times are unpredictable. In fact, the two key factors of defining a crisis are that the events are unexpected and negative (Weiner, 1985). Because we work in a profession that revolves around people, the entire profession is unpredictable. Unfortunately, it is very hard to predict the behavior of people. As professionals, we can attempt to prepare for crisis situations by making a crisis communication plan and constantly scanning the media in search of potential crisis, but when it comes down to it, especially in sports where your brand revolves around your athletes and your staff, it is almost impossible to predict. Even though crisis occur in almost every industry, the sports industry undoubtfully gets some of the most media coverage when it

comes to crisis occurring everyday (Henry, 2008). There are several threats that occur for an organization and their publics as a result of a crisis. The main three related threats when it comes to a crisis are public safety, financial loss and reputation loss (Coombs, 2007). All three can have dire effects on a company which is why crisis management has become so imperative today.

Crisis management is the steps an organization takes to deal with or handle a negative situation that occurs suddenly. There are many ways an organization can look to deal with a crisis but the main goal of crisis management in is to prevent or minimize the damage of a crisis on an organization at all costs (Bernstein, 2012). Crisis management in public relations looks to maintain an organizations image while maintaining a positive relationship with its publics. Reputations are one of the most important aspects of a company today which is partly why the public relations profession has become so huge. A positive reputation can drive investment interest, attract the best employees, attract customers and grow consumer base and create a competitive advantage (Carmeli and Tishler, 2005; Davies et al., 2003). As crisis begin to occur at higher and higher rates, crisis management becomes even more important in every industry.

What is Situational Crisis Communication Theory?

Until the emergence of SCCT, crisis communication has had little evidence-based guidelines set forward to help practitioners and their organizations understand the effects of a crisis on their publics along with little knowledge about the best strategies and what their impacts would be in each crisis (Ahluwalia, 2000). Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) is a set of evidence-based guidelines to direct crisis managers and their organizations to which crisis response strategies to use in times of crisis for the best public response (Coombs, 2007). What is perhaps unique about SCCT is that it not only predicts how publics will react to a crisis, but it also predicts how publics will react to the crisis response strategies that an organization utilizes

following a crisis (Coombs, 2007). Ultimately, SCCT uses the type of crisis, the crisis history and the prior relational reputation to determine attribution of responsibility of the crisis for an organization and then offers response strategies for how an organization can best handle these crises. When it comes to determining attribution of responsibility, the central piece of SCCT is attribution theory.

Attribution Theory

Attribution theory plays a tremendous role in SCCT. Attribution theory explains that people look for causes of events that occur, especially if that event is negative or unexpected (Coombs, 2006). The public searches for someone to blame in the event of a crisis, and most times, it is the organization that takes the fall. Attribution theory allows practitioners to predict the reputational threat caused by a crisis (Coombs, 2007). SCCT also uses this idea as the center for its guidelines. How much fault a public attributes to the organization is the basis for which steps the organization can take to respond therefore making Attribution Theory the backbone of SCCT.

Determining Reputational Threat

The first step in determining this reputational threat is the initial crisis responsibility which is the amount of personal control of a crisis a public gives to an organization (Coombs, 1995). By determining how much control a public thinks an organization has over a crisis, the level of attribution for the event can be determined. The higher the attribution of responsibility, the worse the hit on an organization's reputation. Initial crisis responsibility helps divide crisis into three types of crisis clusters (Coombs, 2007). These types of crisis provide a basic frame for how people should react to various types of crisis as they arise based on pieces of the attribution theory.

1. Victim cluster where an organization is seen as the victim of a crisis such as a natural disaster which lends to a weak attribution of responsibility and an overall low reputational threat.
2. Accidental cluster where an organization takes actions that accidentally and unintentionally lead to a crisis which lends to low attribution of responsibility and an overall moderate reputational threat.
3. Preventable cluster where an organization knowingly did something wrong which lends to a high attribution of responsibility and an overall high reputational threat.

The second step in determining reputation threat is looking into the crisis history and the prior relational reputation. Crisis history is an important aspect of SCCT as research has show that history of similar crisis in an organization's past intensifies the direct reputation threat of a current crisis, regardless of which crisis cluster the current crisis falls into (Coombs, 2014). Even if the current crisis is perceived as an accident, the public will assign more responsibility to the organization as they have had problems of similar nature in the past. Each time an organization falls into a crisis, the reputational threat increases simply due to the fact of a past similar crisis. If crises continue to occur with the same organization, people will eventually begin to place more and more blame on that organization as their crisis' are clearly reoccurring problems that they are not fully addressing the first time around. In addition to looking into crisis history, SCCT also investigates prior relational reputation which is how well or poorly an organization has or is perceived to have treated its publics in other contexts (Coombs, 2007). The more poorly an organization is perceived to have treated its publics in the past, the higher the reputational threat. An organization can claim a crisis as an accident but if that organization is known to have past problems with the current crisis in different environments, people will begin to see these

problems as not be address properly by the organization and therefore the publics would attribute more responsibility of crisis to that organization, similar to the implications of an organizations crisis history.

Behavior intention propositions

During and following a crisis, there are several things that can be impacted, one of them being a publics behavior. During and following a crisis, publics often experience emotions depending on their position with an organization and these emotions impact behavior intention which can be just as harmful as negative hits to an organization's reputation.

There is a positive correlation between anger and perceived crisis responsibility whereas anger increases the likelihood of the spread of negative word of mouth and decreases purchase intentions in an audience (Coombs and Holladay, 2007). In conjunction with SCCT, there are three main behavior intention propositions to consider.

1. Crisis Responsibility Affect Proposition states that as crisis responsibility grows, feelings of anger will intensify, and feelings of sympathy decrease within an organization's public.
2. Organizational Reputation- Behavior Intention Proposition states that the more negative the existing reputation of the organization currently under crisis, the less likely the publics are to have behavioral intentions that are positive and in support of an organization.
3. Affect-Behavioral Intention Proposition states that the stronger the feelings of the negative effect are, the less likely the publics are to have behavioral intentions that are

positive or in support of an organization and the more likely the publics are to engage in negative word of mouth.

Behavior intentions that are not in support of an organization can have many negative consequences for an organization. Not only is negative word of mouth damaging to your organization's reputation, but unsupportive behavior intentions can also lead to a decrease in purchase intention which can lead to a serious financial loss for an organization on top of the reputation threat.

Crisis Response Strategies

The goal of SCCT is to match the responsibility and aid to victims in the crisis to decrease the reputational damage that could be generated by the crisis (Coombs, 2008). SCCT looks to them match crisis response strategies to a crisis after determining the attribution level and the reputational threat. Not only does it seek to match the strategy with crisis, it also looks to determine the response an audience would have to each strategy which aids to figuring out which strategy is the best option for an organization.

According to Coombs (2007), there are three main objectives when it comes to an organization's chosen crisis response strategies. These three main objectives are:

1. Shape attributions of the crisis
2. Change perceptions of the organizations in crisis
3. Reduce the negative affect generated by the crisis.

When determining which crisis response strategy an organization should use, there are a few things a crisis manager needs to remember. If a crisis manager wishes to change the perception its publics are holding of an organization, managers should work to present new, positive

information surrounding the organization and remind their publics of the past good works by the organization, however, research from agenda setting and reputation suggest that publics will adopt the media's frame for a crisis Coombs, 2007). If this happens, crisis managers need to choose strategies that work within the new frame that their publics are deciding to believe and not picking strategies specific to the organizations desired frame otherwise their strategies will most likely not be useful. One last thing for crisis managers to keep in mind is that financial resources are usually the most dominant restraint when it comes to crisis management and must be conscious of this before making their efforts and choosing which strategies to utilize in response to a crisis.

Based on Coombs (2007), Table 1 below indicates which response strategies should be matched with each type of crisis an organization is facing in conjunction with SCCT evidence-based guidelines.

Table 1: Match between crisis types and crisis response strategies.

Crisis types	Crisis response strategies
Victim cluster Natural disaster Rumor Workplace violence Product tampering/Malevolence	Deny strategies Attack the accuser Denial Scapegoat
Accidental cluster Challenges Technical-error accidents Technical-error product harm	Diminish strategies Excuse Justification
Preventable cluster Human-error accidents Human-error product harm Organizational misdeed with no injuries Organizational misdeed management misconduct Organizational misdeed with injuries	Rebuild strategies Compensation Apology

Source: adapted from: Coombs (2007), p. 168 and 170.

Based on the perceived attribution of responsibility and reputational threat, there are three groups of crisis response strategies:

1. Denial
2. Diminish
3. Rebuild

Table 2 below describes the various crisis response strategies associated with SCCT in detail. These strategies are broken down into four categories depending on the type of response desired. Deny strategies is when an organization removes any connection between the organization and the crisis, rumor and challenge strategies is when an organization argues there is no real crisis, diminish strategies are where an organization argue that the crisis is not as bad as people think or that the organization lacked control over the crisis and bolster strategies is where an organization offers minimal opportunity to develop reputational assets.

Table 2

Types of Strategy*	**Strategic Response***	**Tactical Actions***	**Tactical Actions Description***
Primary crisis response strategies	Deny crisis response	Attack the accuser	Crisis manager confronts the person/group claiming something is wrong.
		Denial	Crisis manager asserts that there is no crisis.
		Excuse	Crisis manager minimizes organizational responsibility by denying intent to do harm and/or claiming inability to control causes of crisis.
	Diminish crisis response	Scapegoat	Crisis manager blames some person or group outside the organization for the crisis.
	Rebuild crisis response	Justification	Manager minimizes perceived damage caused by the crisis
		Compensation	Crisis manager offers money or other gifts to victims.
		Apology	Crisis manager accepts full responsibility and asks stakeholders for forgiveness.
Secondary crisis response strategies	Bolstering crisis response	Reminder	Manager tells stakeholders about the past good works of the organization.
		Ingratiation	Crisis manager praises stakeholders and reminds them of past good works/relationships.
		Victimage	Manager reminds them that the

Summary

Situational crisis communication theory has a very well laid out, evidence-based set of guidelines that understand the various directions that reputational threats come from as a result of a crisis for an organization. SCCT allows for an organization to analyze the reputational threat level by looking at the crisis type, crisis history and prior relational reputation along with providing specific strategies based on that the various crisis types and reputational threat levels. Behavior intentions and emotions also play a vital role in how an organizations publics react to an organizational crisis. Overall, it is a very structured way that, if an organization follows, will allow for a them to move through a crisis smoothly while keeping their reputation is good standing with their key publics.

There is one major gap the SCCT fails to acknowledge that may not have impacted the theory when it was produced but may have a significant impact today. SCCT lacks in the fact that new technology and platforms have not yet been factored into the research. In current times, new technology and digital platforms dominate consumers lives. Not only do consumer use it, but they depend on it in their everyday lives to give and receive information along with voicing their opinions in a way they haven't been able to in the past. It would therefore be to great advantage to investigate how new media and technology affects the reputational threat posed to a company following a crisis. It is important to investigate how other media affects SCCT. As of 2008, more people receive their news from TV, 57 percent, than from print, 27 percent, showing how technology has become increasingly important in the lives of the publics and how the media can ultimately impact the attribution of responsibility (Audience, 2008). From 2008 to now, the numbers have most likely climbed even higher for the percentage of people who consumer their news through new media channel. Coombs (2007) briefly discusses how organizations are forced

to work within the frame set forward by the media which is a step in the right direction in discussing how new media has impacted the jobs of crisis managers, however, social media has not yet been addressed in conjunction with SCCT. Social media allows for people all over the world to become involved in conversation and put their opinion out there for others to see. This is therefore a medium where the public can now create their own frame for how they perceive the crisis making these platforms and these technologies increasingly important to keep up with. How does social media impact attribution of responsibility and how does it increase or decrease reputational threat in conjunction with SCCT? This is the next step in SCCT and the next expansion to the theory that needs to be discussed.

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