Does Planning and Practice Make Perfect? A Study of Communication Culture, Autonomy and PR Practitioners' Confidence in Handling Crises

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ABSTRACT

The study builds on research by Marra (1998) who examined crisis communication case studies and found that organizations with crisis plans do not always manage crises well. To assess Marra's (1998) concept of communication culture, this study looked at organizations' use of two-way symmetrical communication (Grunig, 1992); PR professionals' crisis confidence and communication autonomy; and the presence of a crisis plan. An Internet survey of members of the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) yielded 251 valid responses.

Findings revealed that PR professionals who reported they were part of the dominant coalition exhibited more confidence in their organization's ability, their own ability and their CEO's ability to handle a crisis. PR professionals who viewed their organizations higher on their use of two-way symmetrical communication (communication culture) displayed more confidence in their organization's and CEO's abilities to handle a crisis but not their own.

Additionally, PR practitioners who have a crisis plan for the organization and who perceive they are part of the dominant coalition have more confidence in their organization's ability, their own ability, and their CEO's ability to handle a crisis than those who only had a crisis plan.

Research also revealed that PR practitioners who have a crisis plan for the organization and who perceive their organizations higher in their use of two-way symmetrical communication exhibited more confidence in their organization's ability and their CEO's ability to handle a crisis than those who had only a crisis plan; however, they did not display more confidence in their own ability to handle a crisis.

Crisis communication scholars and industry professionals emphasize the importance of developing a crisis management plan and practicing the plan by simulating crisis scenarios (Coombs 2007; Fearn-Banks 2007); however, there may be other factors impacting the effective handling of a crisis (Marra, 1998, Penrose, 2000; Schoenberg,

2005). An organization may have the best crisis plan in the world but fail to handle a crisis properly. Likewise, an organization may have no crisis plan in place but handle a crisis extremely well. So why do some organizations fail at crisis management in spite of the best laid plans? Perhaps planning and practice do not make perfect. This study examines crisis communication by exploring other factors that may contribute to the successful handling of crisis situations. The study argues that while crisis preparation is important and necessary, it may not ensure the successful handling of a crisis situation.

Crisis Preparation

Although the term "crisis" has been defined by a number of scholars, no single definition exists. Barton (1993) states that a crisis is "a major unpredictable event that has potentially negative results" (p. 2). Fink (1986) describes a crisis as an event that increases in intensity and is given much scrutiny by the media. Fearn-Banks (2007) defines a crisis as "a major occurrence with a potentially negative outcome affecting the organization, company, or industry, as well as its publics, products, services, or good name. A crisis interrupts normal business transactions and can sometimes threaten the existence of the organization" (p. 2). Crises are sometimes unpredictable and often strike suddenly. Depending on how the company handles the situation, the impact of a crisis on a company can be devastating. A poorly handled crisis can lead to a damaged reputation, unhappy stakeholders, lost revenue and even legal problems.

Crisis management practitioners and scholars emphasize the key role communication plays during a crisis. For example, Fearn-Banks (2007) refers to crisis communication as the interaction (verbal, visual, or written) between an organization and its publics. González-Herrero and Pratt (1996) also underscore the importance of message control during a crisis by emphasizing tasks such as assigning spokespersons, developing communication materials, communicating to the public what steps are being taken in the crisis, targeting messages to appropriate publics, and providing the media with updates. Additionally, Kaufman (1988) argues for the release of accurate and timely information to the media and its publics and says that when an organization fails to release information it "relinquishes the substantial amount of control it could have exercised over the flow of information to the media" (p. 15).

A number of crisis communication scholars have focused on crisis preparation as a strategy for minimizing damage to corporate reputation. Coombs (2007) emphasizes that an organization should be as prepared as possible to "react" properly to a crisis. Most crisis communication experts emphasize the importance of developing a crisis communication plan and practicing the plan by simulating various crisis scenarios (Coombs 2007; Fearn-Banks 2007). It is impossible to anticipate and simulate every possible crisis situation an organization might face; therefore crisis preparedness can only go so far in helping an organization successfully manage a crisis. Marra (1998) strongly believed there were other factors that impact how an organization handles conflict. By examining a number of crisis communication case studies, Marra developed a paradigm that defines successful crisis communication.

By examining a number of crisis communication case studies, Marra (1998) determined that while crisis plans are crucial to successful crisis communication, they may be overrated. He noted that organizations with crisis plans do not always manage crises well and cited examples such as NASA's handling of the explosion of the Challenger Space Shuttle and the University of Maryland's handling of the death of basketball star Len Bias. Other organizations like Johnson & Johnson, which successfully managed the Tylenol tampering case, and McDonald's, which effectively handled the aftermath of a mass shooting in its San Ysidro, Calif., restaurant, did so without a crisis plan. Marra states that "if an organization does not have a communication philosophy that supports the attributes necessary for excellent crisis public relations, a crisis plan, no matter how effective, will not likely work" (p. 465). Marra believes that too many public relations practitioners approach crisis communication with a technical mentality. He states that public relations practitioners must look beyond this technical mindset and consider other factors that might predict successful crisis communication more accurately than the presence of a crisis plan.

A Model for Successful Crisis Communication

Some of the factors Marra (1998) considers instrumental to successful crisis communication are outlined in his paradigm. Marra's model for successful crisis communication relies on two conditions that must be met in order to skillfully handle a crisis: "…the overall communication culture within an organization and whether the senior public relations practitioner is viewed as a strategic manager by the members of his or her dominant coalition (senior decision makers)" (p. 463).

Communication Culture

What Marra (1998) terms "communication culture" draws heavily from Grunig's Excellence Theory (1992). Marra, like Grunig, believes in a communication culture that makes use of two-way communication, and he states that "some organizations encourage two-way communication while others rarely or grudgingly disseminate information to its relevant audiences" (p. 465). He believes two-way communication is an essential ingredient for successful communication, especially during a crisis. Marra also notes that "the communication culture present within an organization at the time of a crisis is a far better predictor of successful crisis management than the presence or absence of a crisis communication plan" (p. 466). He concludes that "too many managers treat crisis communication plans as a simple and singular solution to a crisis" (p. 472).

Marra (1998) determines that a communication culture that is rich in two-way communication is the type of culture that leads to successful crisis communication. He cites instances in which organizations have remained closed and defensive in their communication efforts during crisis situations. For example, following the cocaine-related death of basketball player Len Bias, the University of Maryland remained silent for more than a month, even though the school's crisis plan called for school officials to release information as quickly as possible. "While the presence of a strong, proactive

communication culture can overcome the lack of a crisis plan, the opposite is also true…an equally strong but closed and defensive communication culture can neutralize any benefit of a crisis communication plan" (p. 468).

One of the first scholars to introduce the concept of two-way communication in the practice of public relations was Grunig (1992) whose Excellence Theory was one of the earliest concepts that focused on the engagement of stakeholders and publics. The theory emphasizes the importance of listening and receiving feedback from one's publics. Excellence Theory features a four model framework and is based on the idea that public relations has evolved through the years from mostly one-way communication to two-way communication (Grunig & Hunt, 1984). The press agent/publicity model of communication, a form of one-way communication, serves a propaganda function and involves telling half-truths, distorting information or simply not communicating at all. The public information model of communication, also a form of one-way communication, is used to disseminate factual information without a focus on persuasion. The two-way asymmetric model of communication features two-way communication, which is used to gain insight on the publics' attitudes and beliefs so as to persuade them better. The two-way symmetric model of communication features practitioners using open dialogue and two-way communication with a goal of mutual understanding between an organization and its publics. Excellence Theory posits that public relations is practiced in an excellent manner when public relations professionals communicate using the two-way symmetric model of communication. Therefore, Marra concludes that organizations practicing the two-way symmetrical model of communication during a crisis situation are engaging in excellent public relations.

Communication Autonomy

The second factor that Marra (1998) considers instrumental to successful crisis communication is what he calls "communication autonomy." Marra defines communication autonomy as "the amount of power and responsibility an organization gives its public relations staff" (p. 469). Public relations professionals with communication autonomy are allowed to do their jobs without having to run every detail by management. They have the support of senior management, also known as the dominant coalition, and are allowed to make on-the-spot decisions. Public relations professionals who do not have the power or autonomy to release information without running it by senior level management are not a part of the dominant coalition. Marra emphasizes the importance of senior public relations practitioners being valued members of the dominant coalition. They must be leaders, managers and report directly to the chief executive officer of the organization. Communication autonomy can only be achieved when an organization's senior public relations official is a part of the dominant coalition.

Marra (1998) cites AT&T and its 1990 long distance network crisis as an example of an organization that practiced communication autonomy while successfully handling a crisis. The company's public relations staff quickly provided information to stakeholders, including the media. Furthermore, corporate attorneys were not involved in the

company's communication decisions. Conversely, after star basketball player Len Bias died of suspected cocaine use, the University of Maryland relegated its communication responsibilities to a mid-level public relations technician who was allowed to release information only after the university's president, vice presidents and the school's attorney had approved it. As Marra asserts, "Organizations that have managed crises well…did so, in part, because the senior public relations practitioner was inside the boardroom helping to set strategy, not outside the boardroom waiting to be told what to do" (p. 473).

According to Marra's model (1998), if the public relations professional is not part of the dominant coalition or the organization does not practice two-way symmetrical communication, then crisis communication efforts will likely fail. To extend Marra's premise, this study goes beyond a review of previous crisis communication case studies by exploring public relations practitioners' opinions of crisis planning, communication culture and communication autonomy and their impact on crisis communication.

To assess communication culture, this research study will look at organizations' use of two-way symmetrical communication, based on Grunig's (1992) Excellence Theory, and its impact on public relations professionals and their confidence in effectively handling a crisis situation (crisis confidence). The study also will assess the senior-level PR professional's involvement in the dominant coalition (communication autonomy) and its impact on crisis confidence. Finally, the study will explore the presence of a crisis plan and assess its impact on crisis confidence. The purpose of the study is to examine the usefulness and impact of crisis planning and crisis preparedness and to assess practitioners' possible overreliance on crisis preparation. Many scholars and professionals tout the importance of developing a crisis plan, but is a crisis plan all that is needed to effectively handle a crisis?

This research study is important because it can offer insight into public relations practitioners' preparedness and confidence in handling a crisis by going beyond the crisis plan. Even organizations that have crisis plans have handled crisis situations poorly. This study offers insight into what other factors are at play during a crisis situation. Therefore, the following hypotheses and research questions are proposed:

> H1: Public relations professionals who rate their organizations higher on
> their use of two-way symmetrical communication will indicate
> a) more confidence in their organization's ability to handle a crisis.
> b) more confidence in their ability to handle a crisis.
> c) more confidence in their CEO's ability to handle a crisis.

> H2: Public relations professionals who indicate they are a part of the
> dominant coalition will indicate
> a) more confidence in their organization's ability to handle a crisis.
> b) more confidence in their ability to handle a crisis.
> c) more confidence in their CEO's ability to handle a crisis.

RQ1: Will public relations professionals who have a crisis plan for the organization and who indicate they are part of the dominant coalition have
a) more confidence in their organization's ability to handle a crisis than those who only have a crisis plan?
b) more confidence in their ability to handle a crisis than those who only have a crisis plan?
c) more confidence in their CEO's ability to handle a crisis than those who only have a crisis plan?

RQ2: Will public relations professionals who have a crisis plan for the organization and who rate their companies higher in their use of two-way symmetrical communication have
a) more confidence in their organization's ability to handle a crisis than those who only have a crisis plan?
b) more confidence in their ability to handle a crisis than those who only have a crisis plan?
c) more confidence in their CEO's ability to handle a crisis than those who only have a crisis plan?

METHODS

Data

Marra (1998) used in-depth analyses of several crisis case studies to justify his claims. This study expanded on Marra's research by surveying public relations professionals on the communication culture that exists within their organization and their level of confidence in the organization's ability to handle a crisis situation. An online survey investigating PR practitioners' and organizations' crisis preparedness, communication culture, communication autonomy and crisis confidence was conducted over a three month period (January through March, 2010). Potential respondents were identified from a comprehensive member list of the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA). An e-mail invitation and the survey link were sent to PRSA members encouraging them to participate in the survey. The survey was hosted at www.surveymonkey.com, and the sample yielded 251 responses.

Measures

Two-way symmetrical communication (communication culture) was the composite measure of four items adapted from a scale used by Grunig et al. (2002) ($\alpha = .75$). Public relations practitioners were asked their perception of two-way symmetrical communication in their organization. On a 5-point Likert scale where 1 meant "strongly disagree" and 5 meant "strongly agree," practitioners were asked 1) whether top executives in their organization believed that the purpose of public relations is to develop mutual understanding between the management of an organization and publics the organization affects, 2) that before starting a public relations program, surveys or informal research should be conducted to find out how much management and their

  publics understand each other, 3) that the purpose of public relations is to change the attitudes and behavior of management as much as it is to change the attitudes and behaviors of publics, and 4) that public relations should provide mediation for the organization – to help management and publics negotiate conflict.

Dominant coalition (communication autonomy) was the additive measure of five items (α = .88). Public relations practitioners were asked whether in their organization, 1) at least one PR professional had a seat at the management table, 2) was involved in meetings with the top executives of their organization, 3) whether top executives of their organization consulted with at least one PR professional before taking actions on most things, 4) whether top executives of their organization consulted with at least one PR professional before making major decisions that could impact the organizations and its stakeholders, and 5) whether at least one public relations professional was a power broker in their organization.

PR practitioners were asked if their organizations had a *crisis plan* and the confidence in their organization's ability, their own ability, and their CEO's ability to handle a crisis on a 5-point scale where 1 meant "strongly disagree" and 5 meant "strongly agree."

Of those participants responding to demographic questions, there were far more female practitioners (n = 150, 69.8%) than male professionals (n = 65, 30.2%); on average, professionals were 40-49 years old (SD = 1.08); typical practitioners reported holding a four-year college degree and having some graduate school (n = 217, SD = .96); and, of those who reported their ethnicity, Caucasian professionals were dominant with 89.2% (n = 189), followed by Hispanics 4.7% (n = 10), African Americans 4.2% (n = 9), and Asians 1.9% (n = 4). There were no Native American practitioners. Respondents reported an average of 11-15 years of public relations practice (SD = 1.47, n = 215). Of those who reported their public relations role within their organization (n = 215), 20% were executives (n = 43), more than half (56.7%, n = 122) were directors or managers, 16.8% were technicians (n = 36), and 6.5% (n = 14) indicated other categories.

RESULTS

H1 predicted that public relations professionals who rate their companies higher on their use of two-way symmetrical communication will indicate a) more confidence in their organization's ability to handle a crisis, b) more confidence in their ability to handle a crisis, and c) more confidence in their CEO's ability to handle a crisis.

Correlation analysis as reported in Table 1 showed that PR professionals who view their companies higher on their use of two-way symmetrical communication displayed more confidence in their organization's ability to handle a crisis ($r = .50$, p<.01) and more confidence in their CEO's ability to handle a crisis ($r = .46$, p<.01) but did not have more confidence in their own ability to manage a crisis ($r = .13$, p=.056). Therefore, H1a and H1c were supported, but H1b was not supported.

Table 1
Summary of Correlations between Public Relations Practitioners' Ratings of Two-Way Symmetrical Communication and Confidence in Ability to Handle Crisis

Measure	1	2	3	4
1	-			
2	.50**	-		
3	.13	.43**	-	
4	.46**	.83**	.36**	-

Note: 1 = two-way symmetrical communication; 2 = confidence in their organization's ability to handle a crisis; 3 = confidence in their own ability to handle a crisis; 4 = confidence in their CEO's ability to handle a crisis.

H2 maintained that public relations professionals who indicated that they are part of the dominant coalition will indicate a) more confidence in their organization's ability to handle a crisis, b) more confidence in their ability to handle a crisis, and c) more confidence in their CEO's ability to handle a crisis.

Correlation analysis indicated that PR professionals who view they are part of the dominant coalition in their company exhibited more confidence in their organization's ability to handle a crisis ($r = .58$, p<.01), more confidence in their own ability to manage a crisis ($r = .27$, p<.01), and more confidence in their CEO's ability to handle a crisis ($r = .52$, p<.01). In sum, H2a, H2b and H2c were all supported (see Table 2).

Table 2
Summary of Correlations between Public Relations Practitioners' Perceptions of Their Part of the Dominant Coalition and Confidence in Ability to Handle Crisis

Measure	1	2	3	4
1	-			
2	.58**	-		
3	.27**	.43**	-	
4	.52**	.83**	.36**	-

Note: 1 = dominant coalition; 2 = confidence in their organization's ability to handle a crisis; 3 = confidence in their own ability to handle a crisis; 4 = confidence in their CEO's ability to handle a crisis.

RQ1 examined whether public relations professionals who have a crisis plan for the organization and who indicate they are part of the dominant coalition have a) more confidence in their organization's ability to handle a crisis than those who only have a crisis plan; b) more confidence in their ability to handle a crisis than those who only have a crisis plan; and c) more confidence in their CEO's ability to handle a crisis than those who only have a crisis plan. A two-independent-samples T test was conducted to answer this research question. As seen from Table 3, public relations practitioners who have a crisis plan for the organization and who perceive they are part of the dominant coalition did have more confidence in their organization's ability ($t = 3.75$, p<.001), their

own ability (*t* = 1.99, *p*<.05), and their CEO's ability (*t* = 3.40, *p*<.01) to handle a crisis than those who had a crisis plan only.

Table 3
T-Test Comparing Means for Confidence in Crisis Handling between Organizations That Have Crisis Plan and Dominant Coalition and Those That Have Crisis Plan Only

	1	2	3
Crisis plan and PR as part of dominant coalition	M diff =.74 t = 3.75 *df* = 42.62	M diff =.27 t = 1.99 *df* = 165	M diff =.76 t = 3.40 *df* = 40.54
Crisis plan only	*p*<.001	*p*<.05	*p*<.01

Note: 1 = confidence in their organization's ability to handle a crisis; 2 = confidence in their own ability to handle a crisis; 3 = confidence in their CEO's ability to handle a crisis.

RQ2 investigated whether public relations professionals who have a crisis plan for the organization and who rate their companies higher in their use of two-way symmetrical communication have a) more confidence in their organization's ability to handle a crisis than those who only have a crisis plan; b) more confidence in their ability to handle a crisis than those who only have a crisis plan; and c) more confidence in their CEO's ability to handle a crisis than those who only have a crisis plan. A two-independent-samples T test was conducted to answer this research question. It was found that public relations practitioners who have a crisis plan for the organization and who perceive their companies higher in their use of two-way symmetrical communication exhibited more confidence in their organization's ability (*t* = 4.22, *p*<.001) and their CEO's ability (*t* = 2.61, p<.01) to handle a crisis than those who had a crisis plan only. However, public relations practitioners who have a crisis plan for the organization and who rate their companies higher in their use of two-way symmetrical communication did not display more confidence (*t* = 1.64, *p*<.10, n.s.) in their own ability to handle a crisis than those who had a crisis plan only (see Table 4).

Table 4
T-Test Comparing Means for Confidence in Crisis Handling between Organizations that are High in Two-Way Symmetrical Communication and Have Crisis Plan and Those That Have Crisis Plan Only

	1	2	3
Crisis plan and two-way symmetrical communication	M diff =.57 t = 4.22 *df* = 165	M diff =.18 t = 1.64 *df* = 164	M diff =.38 t = 2.61 *df* = 166
Crisis plan only	*p*<.001	*p=.10 ns*	*p*<.01

Note: 1 = confidence in their organization's ability to handle a crisis; 2 = confidence in their own ability to handle a crisis; 3 = confidence in their CEO's ability to handle a crisis.

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to explore the impact of public relations practitioners' preparedness and confidence in handling a crisis by going beyond the crisis plan. Even organizations that have crisis plans have handled crisis situations poorly. This study explores other factors such as the public relations practitioners' membership in the organization's dominant coalition (communication autonomy) as well as the organization's use of two-way symmetrical communication (communication culture).

Results indicate that PR professionals who view their organizations higher on their use of two-way symmetrical communication displayed more confidence in their organization's ability to handle a crisis and more confidence in their CEO's ability to handle a crisis; however, they did not report more confidence in their own ability to manage a crisis. This is somewhat perplexing, but perhaps practitioners already believe in two-way symmetrical communication and feel confident in their own abilities to handle a crisis, with or without an organization's endorsement of two-way symmetrical communication; however knowing the organization embraces this type of communication culture leads to a practitioner's increased confidence in others' ability to handle a crisis. The overall findings agree with Marra (1998) who believed that communication culture, or the practice of two-way symmetrical communication within an organization, leads to successful crisis communication.

Findings also revealed that public relations professionals who report they are part of the dominant coalition exhibited more confidence in their organization's ability to handle a crisis, more confidence in their own ability to manage a crisis, and more confidence in their CEO's ability to handle a crisis. The results confirm what many scholars have proclaimed for decades – to be successful, public relations practitioners must have a seat in the board room (Grunig, 1992; Grunig, Grunig & Dozier, 2002; Grunig & Hunt, 1984). The findings also confirm Marra's (1998) premise that communication autonomy is key to successfully handling crisis communication.

The study also found that public relations practitioners who have a crisis plan for the organization and who perceive they are part of the dominant coalition have more confidence in their organization's ability, their own ability, and their CEO's ability to handle a crisis than those who only had a crisis plan. This data reinforces what Marra (1998) posited about the over-reliance on crisis planning. Public relations practitioners who only had a crisis plan and were not part of the dominant coalition exhibited less confidence in handling a crisis situation. In other words, the best laid plans are worth nothing, unless the public relations practitioner has the respect and attention of the dominant coalition. While it is important for organizations to plan and be prepared for a crisis, it is not a cure all. These results also agree with scholars who emphasize the importance of public relations practitioners having a seat at the management table (Grunig, 1992; Grunig, Grunig & Dozier, 2002; Grunig & Hunt, 1984).

Research also revealed that public relations practitioners who have a crisis plan for the organization and who perceive their organizations higher in their use of two-way

symmetrical communication exhibited more confidence in their organization's ability and their CEO's ability to handle a crisis than those who had only a crisis plan. However, public relations practitioners who have a crisis plan for the organization and who rate their companies higher in their use of two-way symmetrical communication did not display more confidence in their own ability to handle a crisis than those who had a crisis plan alone. Again, this finding is somewhat perplexing. Perhaps an organization's use and support of two-way symmetrical communication is less important, at least when it comes to a practitioner's confidence in their own ability to handle a crisis situation, than being a part of the dominant coalition. It may be that communication autonomy trumps communication culture, at least when it comes to crisis confidence in oneself. The overall findings agree with Marra (1998) and his thesis that communication culture, or the practice of two-way symmetrical communication within an organization, leads to successful crisis communication. The results also agree with previous scholars who emphasize that two-way symmetrical communication leads to the practice of excellent public relations (Grunig, 1992; Grunig, Grunig & Dozier, 2002).

While the overall findings support Marra's (1998) idea that communication culture (use of two-way symmetrical communication) and autonomy (inclusion in the dominant coalition) lead to successful crisis communication, one aspect remains puzzling. While communication culture, or use of two-way symmetrical communication, led to increased crisis confidence for both the organization and the CEO, it did not lead to increased crisis confidence for the individual public relations practitioner. However, communication autonomy, or inclusion in the dominant coalition, did lead to increased crisis confidence for the individual public relations practitioner. One explanation is that practitioners who are part of the dominant coalition naturally feel empowered which equates to more confidence in their abilities. On the flip side, if public relations practitioners work for an organization that practices two-way symmetrical communication, yet they are not part of the dominant coalition, they may feel powerless and unable to make much of a difference in the case of a crisis. Two-way symmetrical communication is a tool - a strategy - that is commonly used in the practice of excellent public relations. It is not empowering, and therefore on its own, might not lead to individual public relations practitioners feeling more confident in their ability to handle a crisis.

Future research should continue to explore both the impact of inclusion in the dominant coalition and the use of two-way symmetrical communication on crisis communication. Perhaps a qualitative study comprised of focus groups and in-depth interviews should be conducted with public relations practitioners to assess their opinions on the subject. Additional concepts must also be explored including the role of both ethics and leadership on successful crisis communication. Future studies might also extend Marra's (1998) initial study, which was conducted more than 15 years ago. Perhaps an exploration of more recent case studies could help illuminate more about Marra's thesis that communication culture (use of two-way symmetrical communication) and autonomy (inclusion in the dominant coalition), not crisis planning, is what matters most when it comes to successful crisis communication.

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