Theory Digest: Situational Crisis Communication Theory

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Situational Crisis Communication Theory Digest

When a petroleum facility in Pasadena, Texas exploded with deadly results, the Phillips Petroleum Company moved to respond to the disaster rapidly. Crisis managers were quick to formulate an official crisis response. What managers in the company did not anticipate was having to respond to previous deadly explosions at their facilities as well. Situational Crisis Communication Theory (Coombs, 2002) points out that whether or not the stakeholders are aware of previous crises is crucial to how the organization must respond.

Organizational crises pose threats to organizational reputations, which could ultimately impact the organization's ability to compete or even survive. When organizations experience crises, knowing what to communicate is at the forefront of concerns for CEO's and managers. Unfortunately, the perfect formula for what should be communicated at precisely what time, has yet to be developed. In its absence, managers must rapidly seek information to determine a communication strategy. Crisis communication, therefore, consists of a complex series of decisions based on available information geared toward resolving the crisis with as little organizational damage as possible.

Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) is a modern innovative theory that holds that an organization's previous history, particularly their past crises, has an impact on how the organization should respond to new crises. SCCT was developed to help managers determine what communication strategies best fit specific crises. Additionally, social media now offers both an element of organizational vulnerability (Coombs, 2015, p.15) and a communication opportunity to innovation managers. The broad reach and rapid nature of social

media has presented enormous opportunity to crisis communication managers (p. 163).

Furthermore, new innovative technologies enable managers to collect and analyze online

messaging (p. 164). Free services like Google Alerts, Unilyzer, and Trendspotter, as well as paid

services like Collective Intellect, Crimson Hexagon and others, enable managers to integrate

traditional media and social media messages into their crisis communication strategies. This

rapidly changing communication landscape makes online monitoring crucial to innovation

management (p. 164).

This Rapid Evidence Assessment (REA) focuses on the question, *What are the elements*

of Situational Crisis Communication Theory, and can its application effectively reduce the

damage to organizational reputation associated with organizational crisis?

Method

Search Strategy

In order to answer the research question and thoroughly analyze SCCT, the search

strategy had to be able to capture studies from SCCT's earliest discussion in 2002, as well

studies that ran counter to Coombs' (2002) theory. This was achieved by using the search string

"situational crisis communication theory" in the TX all text field option. The quotes were used

in order to limit the number of studies that included one or two words of the phrase, but not all of

them in combination. The databases included in this search were UMUC's Business Source

Complete and Academic Search complete. This search yielded 135 studies that in some way

related to SCCT. This list was reduced to 129 by limiting the studies to full text and scholarly

peer reviewed studies. Additionally, Timothy Coombs' book, *Ongoing Crisis Communication:*

Planning, Managing, and Responding (2015), was included to help build the theoretical

framework. The list of 129 studies was manually reviewed to locate studies that either utilized

SCCT, or evaluated the theory. Studies where more than one crisis communication strategy was

used were omitted. 18 studies that fit the requirements of this study comprised the final list. Due

to time constraints for this Rapid Evidence Assessment, six studies were chosen and reviewed

(See Appendix C for PRISMA diagram). The six studies chosen include an early test of SCCT,

the 2007 Coombs study that is associated with the formal beginning of SCCT, one study that

examined the applicability of SCCT, a meta-analysis of SCCT, Coombs' reflection of that

meta-analysis, and one study that found SCCT to be ineffective. This collection of studies

should provide a holistic framework for analysis of SCCT. This REA will consider SCCT in its

earliest iterations in 2002 through its use today. Additionally this paper will examine whether

there are situations in which SCCT is not applicable.
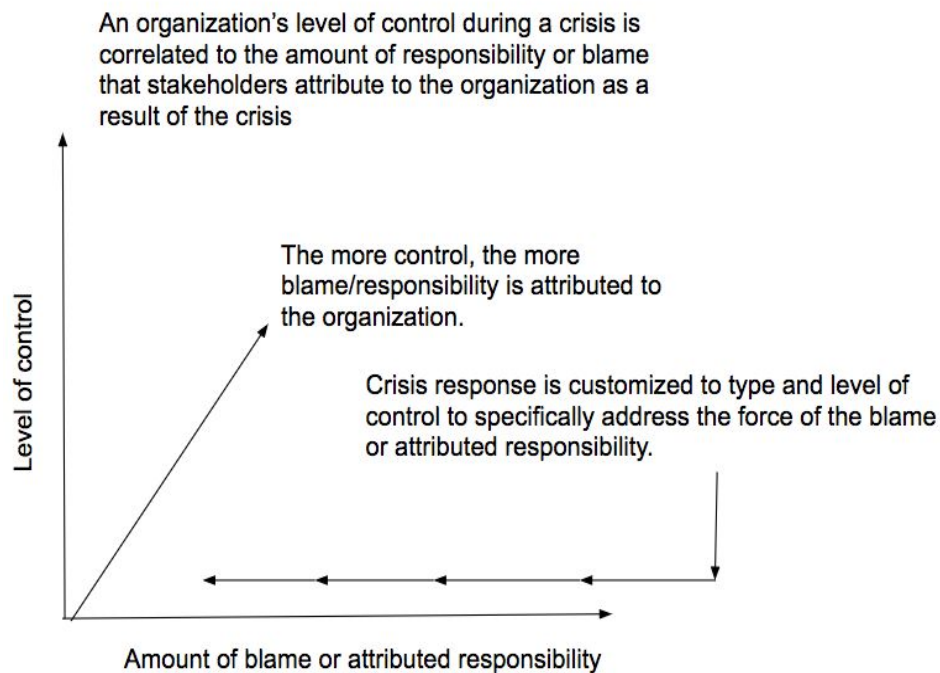
Quality Appraisal

When reviewing research systematically, the assessment of the quality of research is

paramount. Research must be appraised to determine the fitness of purpose for each study

included. For this paper, research was evaluated based on the quality standards of TAPUPAS

(Pawson, Boaz, Grayson, Long, & Barnes, 2003). For this review, each study has been graded

on a four-point scale, in each of the seven categories (4=highest rating, 1=lowest rating): (1)

transparency- is it open to scrutiny?; (2) accuracy- is it well grounded?; (3) purposivity- is it fit

for purpose?; (4) utility- is it fit for use?; (5) propriety- is it legal and ethical?; (6) accessibility-

is it intelligible?; (7) specificity- does it meet source-specific standards? (p. 2). Utilizing the

generic standards defined by Pawson et al. (2003, p. 9) each article was evaluated in each

category. A four-point scale based on these generic standards was used (see Appendix D).

The Theory

Working from the assumption that organizational reputation is a valued resource that should be protected from crises, SCCT was designed to provide a framework of crisis response strategies that are customized to address specific types of crises (Coombs & Holladay, 2002). SCCT, therefore, is a prescriptive model that pairs crisis response with specific types of crises (p. 168-69). In order to identify a crisis, and therefore determine the appropriate response, crises must be defined and categorized. Thirteen crisis types, which ultimately boil down to 3 clusters are depicted in Appendix A. (Coombs & Holladay, 2002, p. 170; Coombs, 2015, p. 150). Crisis communication managers essentially build crisis responses by determining the crisis type or cluster, pairing the crisis with an appropriate strategy, formulating an appropriate response, and disseminating the message through various media (see Appendix A/B).

Conceptual Model

How SCCT protects organizational reputation

An organization's level of control during a crisis is correlated to the amount of responsibility or blame that stakeholders attribute to the organization as a result of the crisis

The more control, the more blame/responsibility is attributed to the organization.

Crisis response is customized to type and level of control to specifically address the force of the blame or attributed responsibility.

Level of control

Amount of blame or attributed responsibility

Figure 1. How SCCT protects organizational reputation

Concept Narrative

The more the public believes that an organizational crisis could be avoided, or the effects lessened by the organization, the more responsibility the public attributes to that organization. In other words, if the organization is seen to have been able to stop the crisis, but did not, the public will blame the organization, and the organization's reputation will suffer. SCCT is a framework of crisis responses that are customized to each type of crisis. Pairing the correct crisis response to the appropriate crisis is seen to lessen the effects of blame on the organization's reputation.

Response types or strategies based on crisis response postures are customized to fit specific crises (see Appendix A for crisis types, and Appendix B for response strategies). By

condensing crisis types down to three primary clusters, crisis managers can prepare for crisis response by cluster and not have to plan out 13 prepared responses.

Results

Studies are in agreement that ethics demand that stakeholder safety remain the primary concern of crisis management (Coombs, 2007, p. 174; Sisco, 2012, p. 12). Organizational reputation should only become the focus once stakeholder safety is insured. Once stakeholder safety has been insured, the attribution of responsibility becomes the initial focus (Coombs, 2007; Ma & Shan, 2016; Sisco, 2012). The more an organization has the ability to control either the instance of crisis, or the outcome, the higher the level of responsibility publics attribute to the organization (Coombs & Holladay, 2002; Coombs, 2007; Sisco, 2012). Organizations have traditionally been reluctant to accept responsibility or apologize, because doing so may place the organization in legal jeopardy (Coombs & Holladay, 2002). The SCCT framework has been designed to enable crisis managers to assess their level of legal exposure, and to adopt a response posture to protect the organization's reputation (Coombs, 2007).

Studies are in agreement that the attribution of responsibility directly affects the public's opinion of organizational reputation (Coombs & Holladay, 2002; Coombs, 2007; Kim & Sung, 2014; Ma & Shan, 2016; Sisco, 2012). Where the studies diverge is in the effectiveness of SCCT in creating a positive public response to crises, and therefore its ability to protect organizational reputation. In the nonprofit experimental case presented by Sisco (2012), respondents felt positive towards organizations that correctly paired their response with a specific crisis type (p. 13). With respect to whether or not participants would be likely to engage with an organization that utilized one of SCCT's response strategies, results were mixed (p. 14). Ma & Zhan (2016)

found that different response types had very different results, which may be attributed to the type of crisis experienced, rather than the response (p. 116). Kim & Sung (2014) found that SCCT response strategies were no better at protecting organizational reputation, than standard reputation management strategies (p. 73). This finding supports the conclusions of Ma & Zhan (2016), that the type of crisis may be more important than the response in determining the degree of organizational reputation damage. Kim & Sung (2014) did note, however, that organizations' reluctance to share negative information about themselves caused transparency issues and made it challenging to form definitive conclusions (p. 75).

In response to the meta-analysis conducted by Ma & Zhan (2016), Coombs (2016) points out the complexity of "attempting to influence cognitions and affect [and that] immediate effects of crisis response strategies account for a small amount of variance" (p. 120). He goes on to note that instructing information (information geared to stakeholders' physical safety), and adjusting information (information to help stakeholders cope psychologically with a crisis), may be the most important aspects of SCCT (p. 122). He suggests further research in this area to help pair SCCT strategies to appropriate crisis types.

Conclusion

An effective organizational response to a crisis can limit the amount of reputational damage and even begin the healing process (Coombs & Holladay 2002, p.166). Situational Crisis Communication Theory is a framework of crisis responses designed to minimize the damaging effects of organizational crisis. Studies have found a strong relationship between organizational control and the amount of responsibility that publics attribute to the organization (Ma & Zhan, 2016). Studies have also shown that when used in specific circumstances, SCCT

can reduce the amount of reputational damage to an organization experiencing a crisis. Conversely, organizations that responded to crisis using messages other than those within the SCCT framework also saw a reduction in the damage to their organizational reputations (Kim & Sung, 2014). It is clear that organizations must respond to crises. What is less clear is which mechanism is most effective at reducing organizational reputation damage.

Social media has brought immense challenges and opportunities to crisis management. This communication innovation has become both a prime concern, and a primary tool for crisis managers. New innovative tools to help monitor and analyze online messaging combined with the broad reach of social media enable managers to keep up with crises and address them rapidly (Coombs, 2015, p. 164).

This REA posed the question, *What are the elements of Situational Crisis Communication Theory, and can its application effectively reduce the damage to organizational reputation associated with organizational crisis?* The elements of SCCT are defined in Appendix A and B. Whether or not SCCT is effective at reducing organizational reputation damage as the result of a crisis is less clear. It is important to note that no studies found negative results when SCCT response strategies were appropriately paired with specific crises. It is also important to note that other response strategies can be effective at reducing organizational reputation damage. The results of these studies show that proper preparation prior to crisis reduces organizational reputation damage. The framework provided by SCCT helps to insure proper preparation prior to organizational crisis, and therefore can reduce the damaging effects of a crisis.

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Appendix A

Crisis types by level of Responsibility (adapted from Coombs & Holladay, 2002, p. 170; Coombs, 2015, p. 150).

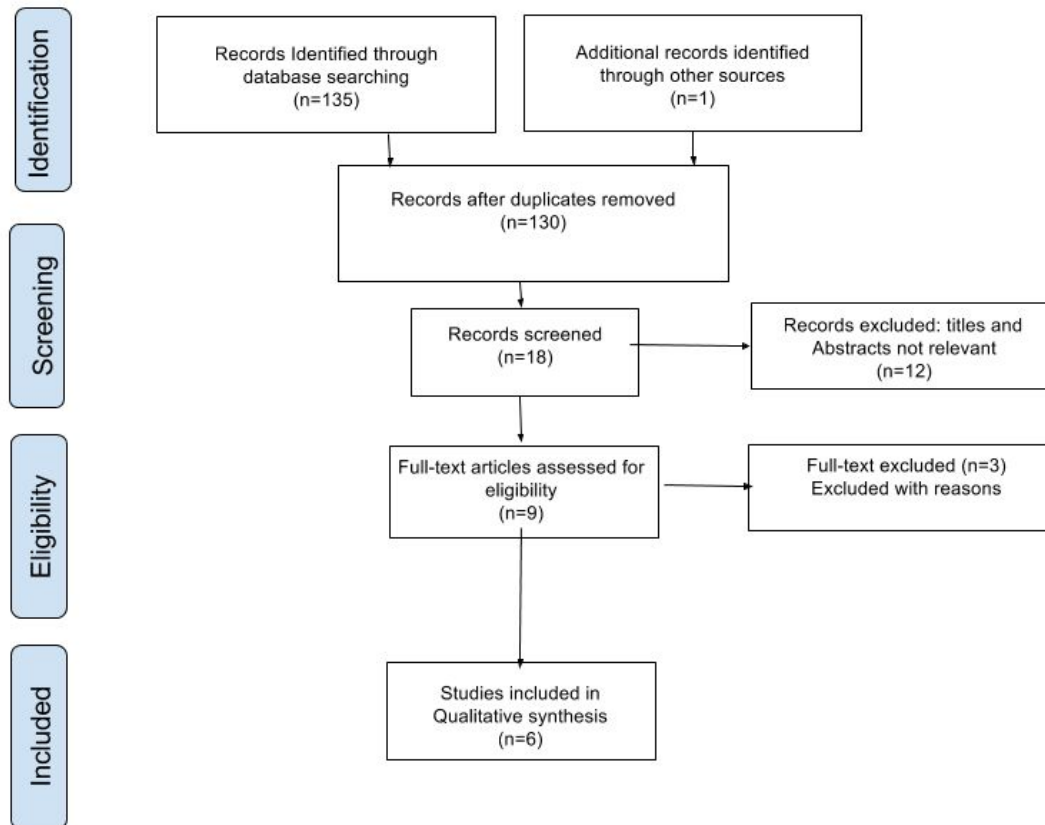| *Cluster*	*Crisis Type*
Victim Cluster Very little attribution of crisis responsibility	Rumor: circulation of false information
	Natural disaster: a naturally occurring event
	Malevolence/product tampering: damage by an external agent
	Workplace violence: An attack by an employee or former employee
Accidental Cluster Low attribution of crisis responsibility	Challenge: confrontation by stakeholder-that the org is operating in an inappropriate manner
	Technical breakdown accident: an industrial accident caused by technical or equipment failure
	Technical breakdown product recall: the recall of a product due to technical breakdown or failure
Preventable Cluster Strong attribution of crisis responsibility	Megadamage: a technical breakdown that produces significant environmental damage
	Human breakdown accident: an industrial accident caused by human error
	Human breakdown product recall: a product recall due to human error
	Organizational misdeeds (with no injuries to external stakeholders: management knowingly deceives stakeholders
	Organizational misdeed management misconduct: management knowingly violates laws or regulations
	Organizational misdeeds with injuries (to external stakeholders): management knowingly puts stakeholders at risk

Appendix B

Crisis Response Strategies (adapted from Coombs & Holladay, 2002, p. 171; Coombs, 2015, p. 147).

Strategy	Purpose	Situation
Attacking the accuser	Refutes claims that a crisis exists	Rumor crisis
Denial	Refutes claims that a crisis exists	Rumor crisis
Scapegoating	Eliminates responsibility for a crisis	Should be avoided
Excusing	Reinforces minimal responsibility for the crisis	Crises with low levels of crisis responsibility
Justification	Reinforces minimal damage from the crisis	Crises with low levels of crisis responsibility
Compensation	Indicates organization is taking responsibility for the crisis	Any crisis with visible victims
Apology	Organization accepts responsibility for the crisis	Any crisis where there is evidence that the organization is the primary actor responsible for the crisis
Reminding	Adds positive information about the organization	When an organization has a favorable prior reputation
Ingratiating	Adds positive information about the organization	Any crisis that involves help from outside actors
Victimage	Builds sympathy for the organization	Product tampering, hacking, workplace violence, and natural disaster crises

Appendix C

Prisma diagram of inclusion/exclusion criteria for article studies

Appendix D

Article Evaluation Using TAPUPAS (Pawson et al. 2003)

Article #	1	2	3	4	5	6
Transparency	2	3	3	3	3	3
Accuracy	3	3	3	3	3	3
Purposivity	4	3	2	3	4	4
Utility	3	3	3	3	4	4
Propriety	3	3	3	3	3	3
Accessibility	3	3	3	3	3	3
Specificity	3	3	3	3	3	3

Rating Scale: 4= Exceeds standard, 3= Meets standard, 2= Below standard,
1=Does not qualify

Appendix E

Article List (Alphabetized by primary author)

Article #	Author(s) Year	Title	Evaluation Notes
1	Coombs, W. T., & Holladay, S. J. (2002)	Helping crisis managers protect reputational assets	This study provides an initial test of SCCT, which "models the crisis process in terms of crisis responsibility and organizational reputation and develops a prescriptive system for matching crisis response strategies to the crisis type" (Coombs & Holladay, 2002, p. 183). This study is important because it marks the beginnings of the theory. Furthermore, the study finds that SCCT, when utilized to customize the organization's response based on the specific type of crisis, is effective at producing positive stakeholder reactions.
2	Coombs, W. T. (2007)	Protecting Organization Reputations During a Crisis: The Development and Application of Situational Crisis Communication Theory	This study has been included because it is widely seen as marking the maturation of the theory. The study has been cited over 1,000 times, and carefully defines crisis response based on crisis type and the history of the organization.
3	Coombs, W. T. (2016)	Reflections on a meta-analysis: Crystallizing thinking about SCCT	This study has been included because it represents the theory creator's reflections on a meta-analysis of SCCT. The author speaks directly to the strengths and weaknesses of the theory, and addresses its limitations.
4	Kim, S., & Sung, K. H. (2014)	Revisiting the Effectiveness of Base Crisis Response Strategies in Comparison of Reputation Management Crisis Responses	This study has been included because it provides a counter argument to the efficacy of the theory. In contrast to Coombs (2007) study, this study finds little support for the use of SCCT. Furthermore, this study finds that traditional responses to crisis are equally as effective at protecting organizational reputation.
5	Ma, L., & Zhan, M. (2016)	Effects of attributed responsibility and response strategies on	This study was included because it provides empirical support for some of the most important aspects of SCCT. The study also

		organizational reputation: A meta-analysis of situational crisis communication theory research	notes the theory's limitations, and areas for further research.
6	Sisco, H. F. (2012)	Non-profit in Crisis: An Examination of the Applicability of Situational Crisis Communication Theory	This study was included because it provides alternate context for SCCT; the theories effectiveness when used in support of nonprofit organizations. The study provides validation for the theory's use with nonprofit organizations and offers "directions to furthering the understanding of the public relations function in NPOs" (Sisco, 2012, p. 16).