CONSIDERATIONS ON USING THE SITUATIONAL CRISIS COMMUNICATION THEORY IN THE CRISIS COMMUNICATION PLANNING ACTIVITIES OF ROMANIAN ARMED FORCES' INFORMATION AND PUBLIC RELATIONS STRUCTURES

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Organizational crisis situations – quite frequently met in military establishments, as well – represent a major threat against reputation, one of the most important intangible resources that organizations own. The Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) suggests focusing managerial efforts in organizations facing crisis situations on preserving reputation through the proper management of stakeholders' perceptions. Moreover, besides the theoretical framework, SCCT offers a wide range of practical tools to be used by managers and communication experts, tools which can be exploited successfully by the military information and public relations structures, too. This paper particularly focuses on the crisis communication planning effort, reviewing the main theoretical aspects of SCCT, as well as practical solutions which can be helpful to crisis communication planners.

Key words: *crisis management, crisis communication, crisis responsibility, SCCT, organizational reputation, spokesperson.*

1. INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

The **reputation** of an organization is considered to be among its strategic resources, placed by scholars in the category of intangible resources, together with intellectual property rights, trademarks, patents, commercial secrets, know-how, organizational culture, etc. From the elements above-mentioned, organizational reputation and employee know-how are considered as the most important, because they have the most substantial contribution to the success of the organization [1]. Reputation is strongly linked to the organizational achievements, especially to those characterized by consistency/permanence [2].

As a strategic resource of an organization, reputation is primarily

threatened in organizational crisis situations, because crises generate among stakeholders numerous perceptions related to the event itself, as well as to the organizations involved, most of these perceptions being usually negative.

Hence, crisis communication, as the main instrument through which the organization can manage stakeholder perceptions, plays an essential role thus being able to preserve or defend its reputation.

The above-made assumptions are also fully valid when it comes to military structures; as a matter of fact, this is the reason why information and public relations activities are carried out within the military. Indeed, in the Romanian Armed Forces, "information and public relations activities … aim at establishing, maintaining and developing relationships based on trust between the military institution and the Romanian society" [3] (M148, art. 1, pt. 2); in other words, it has as a goal to build and maintain organizational reputation. Otherwise, this supposition is confirmed by the explicit mention of reputation as a resource of the military organizations: "maintaining reputation of the military unit …" (M148, art. 111, pt. b).

In our opinion, information and public relations structures (IPRS) could gain significant benefits in their crisis communication from the application of the **Situational Crisis Communication Theory** (SCCT), developed by the American scientist W. Timothy Coombs. This is not the only theory able to support communication strategies; we can mention, for instance, the **image restoration/repair theory** shaped by W. L. Benoit (1995) [4], or the **"black swan" theory** belonging to Nassim Nicholas Taleb (2007) [5]. However, in our opinion, SCCT has de advantage of offering practical tools easy to use by managers and experts considering a proper management of crisis situations which may challenge their organizations; more than that, SCCT allows a proper planning of crisis communication, aspect which we intend to examine more thoroughly below.

Briefly, we can state that SCCT is an important tool addressed primarily to planners who prepare crisis management plans, because it allows an accurate analysis of a given crisis situation and, based on its conclusions, it allows a pertinent estimation of the degree of the reputational threat posed by the crisis. Crisis planners thus can identify the factors which shape the threats to the reputation (initial responsibility for the crisis, crisis history, and the relation between history and previous reputation) and use them to estimate as far as accurately these threats, as well as to determine the most suitable communication strategies to be employed in the crisis response effort.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

We would like to make it clear from the very beginning that, whenever we refer to **crisis situations** in which SCCT may be applied, we do not actually take into consideration political-military crisis situations, regional or world crises, but only unpredictable events occurring at the

organization/s level and generating certain perceptions capable of jeopardizing important stakeholder expectancies, thus being able to affect organizational achievements and to generate negative outcomes [6].

Among such events likely to occur in military organizations, too we can list natural disasters, rumors about the organization, workplace violence, accidents producing deaths/injuries or major damage, organizational misdeeds.

A characteristic of these kinds of events consists of the fact that frequently the effects produced by the event itself are much less damageable – at least as far as organizational reputation is concerned – than the outcomes generated by stakeholder negative perceptions, as well as by behaviors which may come up from these perceptions. Therefore, the communication activities meant to manage this kind of perceptions frequently go up to 70-80% from the activities carried out by the crisis management teams [7].

SCCT – initially made public by W. Timothy Coombs in 1995 and then developed by him and other researchers, too – as a theory which generates concrete crisis communication tools has its roots in the **attribution theory** from the field of psychology, originally shaped by Fritz Heider in 1958 and then developed especially by Bernard Weiner. This theory starts from the premise that people tend to attribute causes to events, especially when they are unexpected and produce negative results; also, people tend to attribute responsibility for these events. Such

premises best describe organizational crisis situations [6], thus being pertinent to affirm that, through the degree of responsibility attributed by stakeholders, a certain crisis situation requires certain response strategies based on communication.

Attribution of responsibility is a process of mind dominated by emotions. Indeed, the attribution theory states that sympathy and anger (dissatisfaction, irritation, worry, anxiety, etc.) are essential emotions of people perceiving a situation to which they tend to attribute causes and for which they would try to assign responsibility to somebody [8]. In our opinion, these emotions will substantially influence stakeholder perceptions and, consequently, their attitudes and behaviors towards the organization confronting a crisis.

In order to appropriately manage perceptions, managers must consider not only the degree of attributed responsibility, but also the context of the crisis situation, the concrete phenomena and processes that generated the crisis, the events and actors influencing directly its development, the crisis management history of the organization/s involved, their attitude and behavior in previous crisis situations. As to this last element, Coombs [9] points on the importance for crisis communication to take into consideration all the crisis situations which the organization faced in its whole history, particularly its attitude and behavior (managerial achievements) during those situations. All these elements describing the crisis situation as a whole produce major consequences

for the attempt of defining the crisis type, shaping the crisis communication content, drafting the communicational strategies, and setting up the messages to be sent out while applying the strategies.

In this respect, together with Sherry Holladay, Coombs elaborates, in the framework of the SCCT, a prescriptive system – that is a system with proactive features – designed to harmonize the crisis response strategies with the crisis situation itself, so that the organizational reputation can be preserved.

In the theoretical construct of the SCCT, the **attributed responsibility for crisis** – as a result of the perceptions and evaluations made by the organizational stakeholders – is considered to be a key indicator of the potential of damaging the reputation, due to the fact that organizational publics would expect the organization that, the more responsible it is considered for a particular situation, the more it does for victims [10]. Defining the crisis types this way and using the level of the reputational damage generated by the crisis in conjunction with the history of previous organizational achievements – particularly those recorded during the management of crisis situations which the organization faced up before as a criterion allows a quite reliable predictability as to the level of responsibility that stakeholders will attribute during a certain crisis situation; as a consequence, the SCCT makes possible the setting up of a mix of adequate crisis response strategies containing both verbal and non-verbal aspects (words

and actions), strategies which the organization designs and utilizes in such circumstances [6].

The focus of the SCCT on the reputational aspect must not be identified at all with a selfish and exclusivist manner of defending the reputation of the organization/s involved in crisis situations. On the contrary, the authors believe that crisis management – crisis communication management included – is primarily aimed, before anything else, at assuring stakeholder security and safety, organizational reputation thus being a secondary goal [11]. Therefore, an organization involved in a crisis must first make sure that it offered its stakeholders **instructing information** (advice on how they may physically protect themselves against crisis consequences) and **counseling** (information helpful for their psychological adaptation to the crisis situation, demonstrating that the organization is concerned about them). As the crisis situation unfolds, the instructions and counseling may be accompanied by **corrective actions** (measures taken to reassure stakeholders that their safety is a priority).

3. CONSIDERATIONS ON THE CRISIS PLANNING PROCESS

According to Coombs' (2011, p. 157) statement [6], "three factors are used in SCCT to evaluate the reputational threat presented by a crisis: crisis type, crisis history, and prior reputation".

However, planning a performant crisis management also involves the consideration of other variables as well, as the responsibility attributed

for crisis, personal control, crisis response strategies, stakeholder emotions [10], as well as the correlations among all those.

Consequently, the authors make the recommendation that crisis communication planners follow a **two-step process** in order to estimate the reputational threats of the crisis event.

The **first step** consists in determining to whom the crisis responsibility will be initially attributed, in accordance with the stakeholder perception: one can consider the event for which planning is to be done as being an accident, sabotage, or criminal negligence? [9]. In reference to the answer of stakeholders, planners may detect the existence of three clusters of crisis situations (**Table 1**).

Table 1. Clusters of responsibility attributed to an organization facing up a crisis

	"Victim" cluster	"Accidental" (unintentional) cluster	"Preventable" (intentional) cluster
Attributions of crisis responsibility	very little	Low	Strong
Examples	• Natural disasters • Workplace violence • Product tampering • Rumors about the organization	• Technical-error accidents • Technical-error product harm • Challenges (disputes) with stakeholders)	• Human-error accident • Human-error product harm • Organizational misdeeds
Communication strategies	Responsibility-**denial** posture: • Attacking the accuser • Denial • Scapegoat	Responsibility-**diminishment** posture: • Excusing • Justification Reputation-**bolstering** posture • Reminding • Ingratiation • Victimage	Reputation-**rebuilding** posture: • Compensation • Apology

There are various opinions as to accepting the responsibility attributed by stakeholders, because it produces often significant consequences in the financial, legal, or reputational field. Our opinion, repeatedly expressed before [12], is that an organization must assume responsibility whenever it exists and communicate this assumption using the most adequate crisis response strategies. Otherwise, even if favorable short-term developments may occur, the lack of assuming responsibility may generate long-term risks for the organization, risks which are likely

to produce more dangerous and less manageable threats.

The **second step** planners should take when estimating the threats takes into consideration two features of an organization, which may become **intensifying factors** in a crisis event:

• **consistency**: the history of the organization, particularly regarding to previous crisis management; thus, a history characterized by frequent crisis situations (great consistency) may suggest stakeholders the presence and persistence of systemic and managerial problems;

• **distinctiveness:** the interaction between organizational history and its prior reputation, especially in relation with the stakeholders; the perception of the fact that the organization successfully solved previous crisis situations, and, particularly, showed consideration to stakeholder interests and expectancies, may generate trust and confidence in its capacity of getting over such kind of events.

In the case of high consistency and/or low distinctiveness, the crisis response strategies suggested by planners must keep into account not only the amount of attributed responsibility, but also these two above-mentioned features. Consequently, the amount of attributed responsibility will be greater, thus intensifying the threats to the organizational reputation.

By taking the two steps described above, the planners may choose either a strategy or a mix of strategies adequate to the amount of the estimated responsibility to be attributed by stakeholders; they

should also be adequate to the stakeholders themselves, as they will be subjects of crisis communication. Thus, starting from the three clusters identified in Table 1, Coombs [6] suggests a list of communication strategies which is not exhaustive, their variety depending only on the professionalism and creativity of planners:

• attacking the accuser (the crisis manager confronts either the person or the group claiming that his/her organization is involved in a crisis situation; the confrontation can go up to the threat to use force against the accuser (lawsuit, for instance);

• denial (the crisis manager affirms, appealing to evidence, that there is no crisis);

• scapegoating (someone outside the organization – either a person or a group – is blamed as responsible for the crisis; the blame must also be based on solid evidence);

• excusing (the crisis manager strives to minimize the organizational responsibility, proving that the organization had no intention to produce damage/harm or had no control over the events that initiated the crisis);

• justification (the crisis manager tries to minimize the perceived damage associated with the crisis event, to show that there has been no severe damages or injuries, to explain that people affected have been treated adequately);

• compensation (the crisis managers offer money or other compensations to the victims). This strategy is required in the cases

when the victims are numerous, have severe injuries or/and suffer serious damage. The accidents and injuries occurred in the theatres of operations fit into this typology;

• apology (the crisis manager publicly admits the full responsibility of the organization for the crisis situation and asks forgiveness from stakeholders);

• reminding (the crisis manager reminds stakeholders on the past good works of the organization, thus appealing to its positive consistency and distinctiveness);

• ingratiation (the crisis manager praises stakeholders for their behaviors and actions);

• victimage (the crisis manager explains that his/her organization is a victim too).

Planners must also consider the actual way in which these strategies may be applied: they may be delivered either as **accounts** (justifications) or as **apologia** (excuses), in accordance with the amount of responsibility attributed by stakeholders to the organization (Table 1).

This brief review of the SCCT allows the conclusion that, from the perspective of crisis planning, this theory permits an **effectively prospective approach**, oriented more to new opportunities in crisis communication and less to benefits from the previous experiences (either of the organization itself or of others).

The use of SCCT also offers the advantage of understanding the crisis situations from the **stakeholder perspective**. Indeed, the perspective of the organization itself on the crisis event in which it is involved may produce perverse effects as excessive concern for the preservation of its own reputation, selfishness, subjectivism, or the consideration of the situation out of its context. Therefore, "an important trend in crisis communication research is the move from a sender perspective (what the organization communicates) to a receiver/stakeholder perspective (how stakeholders perceive the messages)" [13]. Or, from this point of view, M148 (art. 3, pt. c, as well as the stipulations referring to media crises) [3] still seems to give importance primarily to the sender, thus maintaining a certain disadvantage to the receiver.

Moreover, one should not ignore the advantage offered by the SCCT as to the **efficient use of the organizational resources**: in the circumstances of undersized budgets assigned to information and public relations activities, the good planning of the crisis response strategies and their right implementation will result in the optimization of the resources required in such situations [14].

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ENDNOTE

[1] Stakeholder: a person (group, organization) having interests or concerns in an organization (businessdictionary.com). Terms as "relevant publics", "involved publics" or "interested publics" are used as well in the Romanian literature.