MANAGEMENT OF THE COMMUNICATION PROCESS IN CRISIS MANAGEMENT

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Abstract: *The crisis management process includes a wide spectrum of interrelated activities before, during and after a crisis event with crucial application of the principles of an effective communication process which includes all stakeholders inside and outside of the organization. The application of the fundamental principles of the communication process is an essential part of strategic organizational planning, which increases organization's resilience and preparedness for the occurrence of different types of crises or unplanned and unwanted events that affect the organization in numerous ways. The purpose of this article is to highlight the importance of choosing suitable ways of communication and communication strategies with special reference to the preparation of adequate ways of communication. In this context, a survey will be conducted, the aim of which was to determine the existence of crisis communication systems within an organization and to examine the perception of the importance of respondents on the preparation of adequate ways of communication in crisis situations.*

Keywords: *Crisis situations, communication process, crisis communication*

1. INTRODUCTION

Crisis situations include situations that impact every organization in the most diverse and extensive ways. The term "crisis" is encountered in various contexts, making it difficult to define it unequivocally. According to Webster (1971), crises are defined as turning points in which it is decided whether an action or business will continue, be modified, or cease.

A crisis is also defined as a situation in which there is a risk of escalation in intensity, with increased media and government interest, affecting normal business operations, threatening a positive image, and causing harm to the organization in any way (Fink, 2002). Similarly, author Fearn-Banks (2017) defines a crisis as an event with potentially negative consequences that disrupts normal business transactions and, as such, can threaten the very existence of the organization.

Regardless of their type or cause, crisis situations require rapid response, containment, and resolution of the crisis, i.e., effective crisis management. According to Mitroff and Anagnos (2001), crisis management provides a general and critical perspective on new managerial skills and types of organizations in the 21st century. As Bernstein (2020) points out, it is the art of preventing and avoiding troubles when possible and appropriately responding to them when they cannot be avoided.

In short, crisis management is a process which aims to identify and predict various crisis situations and establish special methods within the organization to prevent crises, respond

effectively, and successfully resolve the crisis situation while minimizing its consequences and quickly returning the organization to a normal state (Kešetović and Toth, 2012).

The commitment of top management and the understanding of the importance of systematic planning, preparation, and adequate response to various crisis situations are crucial for the effectiveness of activities in all phases of crisis management where the application of the principles of effective communication and the communication process with all stakeholders inside and outside the organization is indispensable.

2. THE COMMUNICATION PROCESS IN CRISIS MANAGEMENT

Communication involves the exchange of information, ideas, and feelings through verbal and nonverbal means, tailored to the situational context, i.e., the social environment of the communication process. The key elements of the communication process include the sender and receiver of the message, the message being communicated, the medium or communication channel, feedback, and noise in communication (Fox, 2006; Tomić and Jugo, 2021). Considering the context in which communication occurs, its effects can be positive or negative, influenced by how the message is shaped and transmitted with minimal communication noise to internal and external stakeholders.

In the context of crisis management, the management of the communication process, selection of suitable communication strategies and the existence of crisis communication systems within the organization become indispensable parts of strategic organizational planning in preparing adequate responses to various types of crisis situations.

As Fearn-Banks (2017) points out, crisis communication is a dialogue between the organization and its public before, during, and after an adverse event, involving strategies and tactics to mitigate harmful consequences to the organization's reputation. The literature often mentions defensive and offensive communication strategies (Osmanagić Bedenik), where a defensive strategy involves only partial communication with internal and external stakeholders, while an offensive communication strategy is directed towards timely, complete, and sincere communication with all stakeholders to avoid or at least minimize harmful consequences and loss of trust.

Public perception of the complexity of the crisis situation, as well as trust in the bearers of crisis resolution, will depend on the way the communication process is managed during that period.

It can be concluded that an effective communication process plays an indispensable role in all phases and activities of crisis management. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to highlight the importance of selecting appropriate communication methods and strategies, with special reference to the preparation of adequate communication methods in crisis situations.

3. OBJECTIVES AND METHODS

The application of fundamental principles of communication and managing the communication process are indispensable parts of effective crisis management and strategic organizational planning which increase the resilience of the organization and its preparedness for various types of crises, as well as the effectiveness of the organization's actions during and after crisis situations.

Starting from the assumption of the importance of managing the communication process in crisis management, this paper aimed to determine the existence of crisis communication systems in respondents within the organizations in the context of the existence of crisis communication plans and crisis teams as important factors of organizational preparedness for

crises and to examine the perception of the importance of communication with the public during crises, with a special emphasis on the application of appropriate communication methods in crisis situations.

According to the set objectives, the following research hypotheses were formulated:

H1: Crisis communication systems as part of the crisis communication system are not established.

H2: The perception of the importance of applying appropriate communication methods in crisis situations is high.

3.1. METHODS

In order to collect relevant data and address the stated assumptions, a survey questionnaire was prepared and distributed to respondents through personal contact. The survey questionnaire consisted of four parts with a total of 27 closed-ended questions. The survey was voluntary and anonymous, and the research was conducted in April 2024. Data processing was carried out using standard statistical procedures using the SPSS statistical program.

3.2. SAMPLE

The research was conducted on a convenience sample of a total of 34 respondents, students attending professional study programs Crisis Management and Management in Crisis Conditions at the University of Applied Sciences Velika Gorica. The sample included 38.2% female respondents and 61.8% male respondents. Most respondents were aged between 18 and 30 (67.6%) and between 31 and 40 (20.6%). 55.9% of respondents were Management in Crisis Conditions students, and 44.1% were Crisis Management students. Regarding the size of the organization in which they are employed, the largest number of respondents (55.9%) work in organizations with more than 250 employees. 29.4% of respondents were employed in organizations with 50 to 250 employees, while 14.7% worked in small organizations with up to 50 employees.

Due to the small sample, the results obtained from the research cannot be considered representative but will be used as guidelines in the preparation and implementation of future research on this topic.

4. RESULTS

In an effort to determine the existence of crisis communication systems within organizations, respondents were asked a set of questions regarding the existence of crisis plans, crisis teams, crisis communication plans, and the implementation of exercises and simulations of crisis situations.

When asked about the existence of crisis plans in the organizations in which they are employed, 70% of respondents answered affirmatively, while 18% of respondents stated that there are no crisis plans in the organizations in which they are employed. The remaining 12% of respondents did not know whether their organizations have crisis plans. The distribution of responses is shown in Figure 1.

Crisis management plans
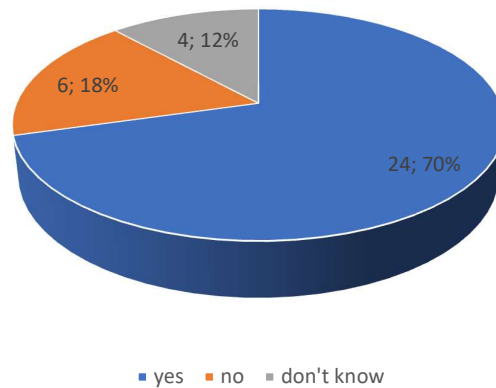

yes ■ no ■ don't know

Figure 1 – Existence of Crisis Plans in the Organization

In response to the question about the existence of crisis teams in their organizations, only 38% of respondents answered affirmatively. As many as 35% of respondents answered that there are no crisis teams in their organizations, while 27% answered that they do not know. The distribution of responses is shown in Figure 2.

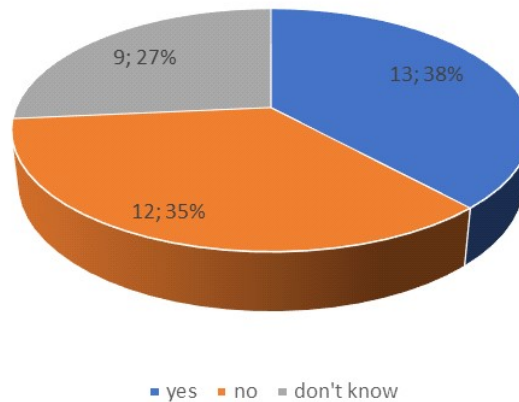## Crisis management teams

yes ■ no ■ don't know

Figure 2 – Existence of Crisis Teams in the Organization

In response to the question about the implementation of exercises and simulations of crisis situations in their organizations, 56% of respondents answered that exercises and simulations are conducted, while 44% answered that they are not conducted. The distribution of responses is shown in Figure 3.

Exercises and simulations of crisis situations
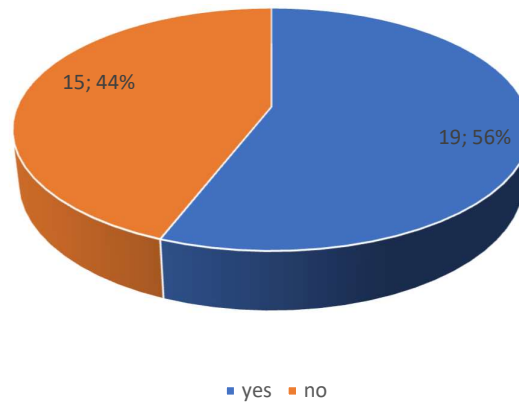

■ yes ■ no

Figure 3 – Implementation of Crisis Exercises and Simulations

In response to the question about the existence of crisis communication plans in their organizations, as many as 47% of respondents stated that they do not know if crisis communication plans exist in their organizations. 32% of respondents indicated that they have them, while 21% answered that their organizations do not have crisis communication plans. The distribution of responses is shown in Figure 4.

Crisis communications plan
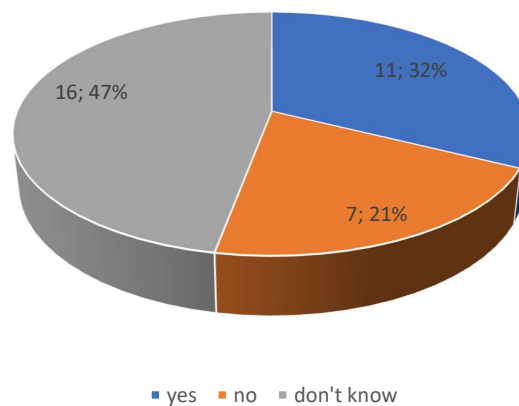

■ yes ■ no ■ don't know

Figure 4 – Existence of Crisis Communication Plans

Although most of the organizations in which the respondents are employed have crisis plans, and a similar number of them conduct exercises and simulations of crisis situations, the obtained results showed that in the majority of organizations there are no crisis teams or that the employees do not know about their existence and work. Also, it is important to highlight that the existence of crisis communication plans with clearly defined guidelines for effectively managing the communication process during crisis situations is neglected. This also confirms the hypothesis that crisis communication systems within organizations do not exist.

Regarding the respondents' perception of the importance of communication with the public during a crisis, 82.4% of respondents stated that it is extremely important. 14.7% indicated that

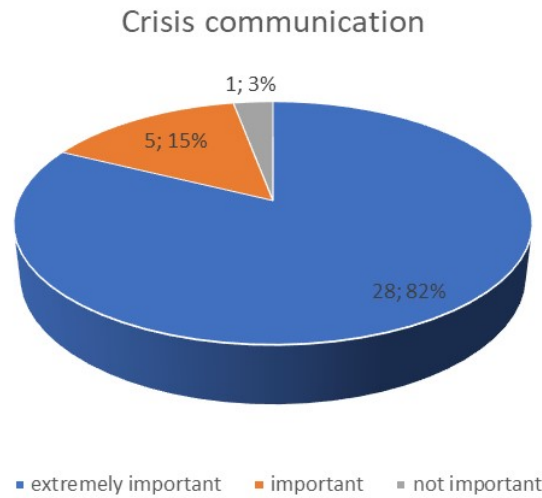it is important, and 2.9% responded that it is not important. The distribution of responses is shown in Figure

Figure 5 – Importance of Communication with the Public in Crisis Situations

To examine the perception of the importance of applying appropriate communication methods in crisis situations, respondents were asked to express their opinion on the given statements using a rating scale from 1 to 5 as follows: 1 = Strongly disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neither agree nor disagree, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly agree.

Table 1. – Communication Methods in Crisis Situations

Communication Method in Crisis Situations	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	M	SD
Messages created during crisis situations must be clear, verified, and unambiguous.	2,9	-	-	11,8	85,3	4,76	0,74
Information must be consistent and issued from the same source.	-	2,9	5,9	17,6	73,5	4,62	0,73
During crises, openness, accessibility, and sharing of relevant information are crucial.	-	-	2,9	38,2	58,8	4,56	0,56
It is important to use appropriate tools for communication with internal and external stakeholders.	-	-	17,6	20,6	61,8	4,44	0,78

Legend: (1) – Strongly Disagree, (2) – Disagree, (3) – Neither Agree nor Disagree, (4) – Agree, (5) – Strongly Agree, M – arithmetic mean, SD – standard deviation.

The range of individual average ratings of responses varies from 4.44 to 4.74. The results showed that respondents believe the application of appropriate communication methods in crisis situations involves the need for clear, verified, and unambiguous messages, consistent and relevant information, and the use of suitable communication tools for communication with internal and external stakeholders. The dominant response of respondents to the given statements was "strongly agree."

Based on the obtained results, it can be concluded that the perception of the importance of communication with the public during a crisis and the application of appropriate communication methods in crisis situations is high and positive, thereby confirming the second hypothesis.

5. CONCLUSION

Managing the communication process in crisis management involves systematic and effective communication with all stakeholders in all phases of crisis management: before, during, and after the crisis. This paper places the emphasis on examining the importance of the communication process during a crisis, as well as on the selection of adequate methods of communication by applying suitable communication tools with internal and external stakeholders with the aim to prevent information gaps, by ensuring the unambiguity and consistency of messages, which contributes to avoiding the appearance of rumours or distorted representations events. The results confirmed the hypotheses, and although the small sample size means the results cannot be generalized to the entire population, they provide an important foundation for the preparation and implementation of future research on this topic.

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UPRAVLJANJE KOMUNIKACIJSKIM PROCESOM U KRIZNOM MENADŽMENTU

Sažetak: *Proces kriznog menadžmenta obuhvaća širok spektar međusobno povezanih aktivnosti prije, za vrijeme i nakon neke krizne situacije uz neizostavnu primjenu načela učinkovitog komunikacijskog procesa sa svim dionicima unutar i izvan organizacije. Primjena temeljnih načela komuniciranja i upravljanja komunikacijskim procesom neizostavan je dio strateškog organizacijskog planiranja kojima se povećava otpornost organizacije i pripremljenost na pojavu različitih vrsta kriza, odnosno neplaniranih i neželjenih događaja koji na organizaciju utječu na brojne načine. Svrha ovog rada je istaknuti važnost odabira prikladnih načina komuniciranja i komunikacijskih strategija s posebnim osvrtom na pripremu adekvatnih načina komunikacije. U tom kontekstu provedeno je anketno istraživanje čiji je cilj utvrditi postojanje kriznih komunikacijskih sustava unutar organizacije te ispitati percepciju važnosti ispitanika o pripremi adekvatnih načina komuniciranja u kriznim situacijama.*

Ključne riječi: Krizne situacije, komunikacijski proces, krizno komuniciranje