

“IT’S THE PERCEPTIONS, STUPID!”

Understanding people’s reactions is rapidly becoming the quintessential element of crisis management. Mapping the linkage between images and actions can not only assist the process, but usually form an action-model.

by Jesper Strömbäck

More than 2,000 years ago, Plato offered one of the most famous allegories to date: the “allegory of the cave”. Well-known does not equal well understood, however, and there are still many insights that can be gained from the allegory of the cave.

In this allegory, Plato asks the reader to imagine the condition of men living in a cave underground where “they have been from childhood, chained by the leg and also by the neck, so that they cannot move and can see only what is in front of them, because the chains will not let them turn their heads”. The only things they can see are images, reflected from a fire onto the walls of the cave. These images they perceive to be reality, as it is the only reality of which they are aware. Some 2,000 years later, Walter Lippman published his classic “Public Opinion”, in which he explained the concept of “pseudo-environment”. This concept refers to all those images of reality in which people believe, and which form the basis of their thoughts, feelings and behaviours. It is this pseudo-environment – that is, the perceptions of reality – that matters, not reality itself. Accordingly, the “analyst of public opinion must begin, then, by recognising the triangular relationship between the scene of action, the human picture of that scene, and the human response to that picture working itself out upon the scene of action.”

Still, in every election campaign, or any crisis, or any other chain of events, many politicians, CEOs, crisis managers and so on behave and talk as if reality – as they themselves perceive it – matters more than the “pictures

in the heads” of the public at large or various target groups and stakeholders. This strongly suggests that they have failed the central lesson, started by Plato and continued by media and communication scholars and analysts, that “It’s the Perceptions, Stupid”, to paraphrase the 1992 Clinton campaign.

In other words, people can only form their feelings, thoughts and behaviours from their perceptions of reality, and in this sense, the perceptions of reality are always more real than reality, however defined. This is why the role of the media is so important in contemporary societies: it is from the media we receive most of the information that we use to form our perceptions of reality. This is especially true with respect to events, people or conditions that are not part of our everyday experiences and where we lack first-hand knowledge. Needless to say, this constitutes most things that we have feelings, thoughts and opinions about. Despite the popular notion of today’s societies as “information societies”, they should rather be thought of as second-hand, third-hand, or fourth-hand information societies.



This is not to say that reality, however defined, is unimportant. I do not want to be interpreted as some kind of postmodernist denying the existence and importance of reality beyond our subjective perceptions of it. Reality matters – but in this context, reality matters mostly insofar as it influences the perceptions of reality. The distance between actual reality and the images and perceptions of reality is a variable, but most of the time there is a linkage between the two. These observations have clear implications for understanding people’s reactions to actors, organisations and institutions involved in a crisis, and can help in forming a model to better understand people’s reactions to crisis management.

UNDERSTANDING REACTIONS TO CRISIS MANAGEMENT By definition, crises are events that pose an unexpected threat which can have negative effects on an organisation, industry, community or group of stakeholders. While unexpected, crises should not be understood as wholly unpredictable. Most organisations suffer crises sooner or later, although the type and severity varies. As crises do, or have the potential to, cause disruptions and damages, there is always a need for crisis management,

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understood as a “process of preventing, preparing for, performing, and learning from crises” (Coombs, 1999, p. 5). Crisis communication is then the process of communicating before, during and after a crisis; it forms part of, but does not equal, crisis management.

Crises thus have to be managed, and there is a need for effective crisis communication in all phases: before, during and after. A necessary part of effective crisis management and crisis communication is the realisation that crises are subject to interpretations. Once again, the perceptions of reality matter more than the actual reality. If shareholders believe that a crisis will cause a company’s stocks to fall in price, they will sell, and if voters believe that a politician has behaved unethically, they will lose confidence in him or her. If the perceived crisis management, then, is what matters most for people’s reactions, the next question is what shapes the perceived crisis management. Here reality comes back into the picture, in that the actual crisis

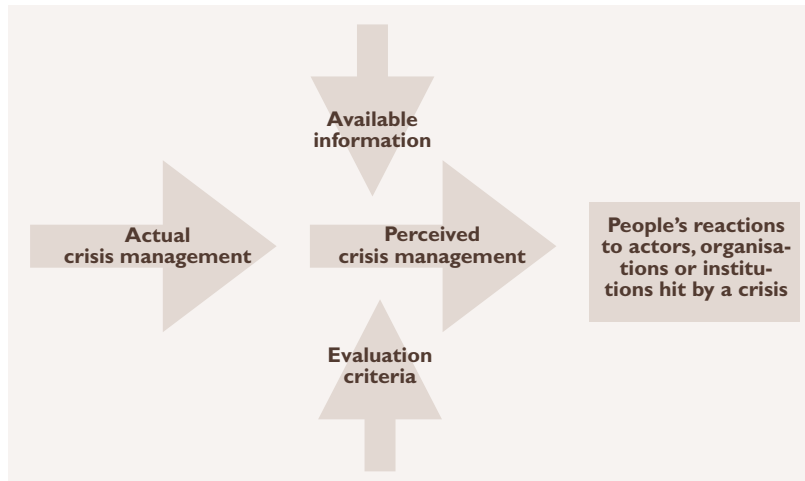


Figure 1 | Model for Understanding People's Reactions to Crisis Management.

management does matter for how the crisis management is perceived. Exactly how much the actual crisis management matters is impossible to know on a general level, but it does matter. An organisation hit by a crisis is never only a victim of the circumstances.

INFORMATION AND EVALUATION Another crucial factor in understanding the perceived crisis management is what information there is available. The available information forms one of the most important bases for people's perceptions of reality, and one way of shaping the

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perceived crisis management is by trying to control the flow of information. Most of the time this is difficult, however, as people receive most of their information from the news media, and the news media can be expected to be both critical of and more credible than an organisation trying to defend themselves and their crisis management. This is particularly true when a crisis has its origins in behaviours that an organisation is supposed to have at least some control over.

This brings us to a third crucial variable: the evaluation criteria people make use of. Regardless of whether we are aware of it or not, we always make use of various evaluation criteria when judging the performances of actors,

organisations, institutions or other entities. Evaluations are simply not formed in a vacuum. For instance, most people believe that politicians should be honest, keep their election promises and not misuse taxpayers' money. They believe that corporations should not pollute more than they are allowed, that they should not use child labour, and that they have responsibilities for a safe work environment. They believe that governmental agencies should be responsive, that they should follow the laws and regulations, and that they should react swiftly if the country is hit by a natural disaster.

MINIMISING THE DAMAGE

Taken together, this suggests that the perceived crisis management is mainly shaped by a) the actual crisis management, b) available information, and c) the evaluation criteria people make use of. The perceived crisis management is in turn decisive in understanding people's reactions to actors, organisations or institutions hit by a crisis and their crisis management (see figure 1; Ström-bäck & Nord, 2006).

An organisation seeking to understand how people react to a crisis that it is involved in must thus attend to the actual crisis management as well as the available information – in most if not all cases, filtered and conveyed through the news media – and the evaluation criteria people make use of. This is true in all phases of a crisis, and has consequences for what crisis response strategies are appropriate or feasible. For example, if the available information indicates that the organisation in question is itself responsible for the crisis, then a strategy of attacking the accuser or of denying that there is a crisis will

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Crisis steering by perception

- ▶ Walter Lippman's 'pseudo-environment': reality matters insofar as it influences the perceptions of reality.
- ▶ People's perceptions of crises matter: if shareholders believe a crisis will cause stocks to fall, they will sell.
- ▶ Perception of crisis management is based on actual crisis management, available information, & the evaluation criteria people use.
- ▶ Organisations should be open, provide information, & build relationships to assess evaluation criteria.

“The organisation should be characterised by openness and provide information that can reduce uncertainty.”

not work. Rather, it might lead to a backlash in public opinion. In such cases, making excuses and promising corrective action might be the only way to minimise the damage to the organisation's reputation.

The choice of crisis response strategies is part of the actual crisis management, while it simultaneously has repercussions for the perceived crisis management. It is thus crucial that an organisation hit by a crisis chooses its crisis response strategy carefully, particularly if the organisation is accused of being at least partly responsible for the crisis at hand. Carefully choosing crisis response strategies is a true challenge, however, since first impressions form quickly and affect the remainder of the crisis communication. It is thus very important not

only that the crisis response strategy is carefully chosen, but also that the initial response is quick. Silence is never a recommended strategy, and the same is true of attempts to withhold information that the media is likely to find out sooner or later. Rather, the organisation should be characterised by openness and provide information that can reduce the uncertainty among those affected, directly or indirectly.

PROBLEM PERCEPTION No matter whether an organisation that is affected by a crisis chooses to use denial, evasion of responsibilities, reducing the offensiveness, corrective action or mortification as the main crisis response strategy, it should not be chosen without recognising that the perceived crisis management ultimately matters more than reality. Plato thus still has something to teach today's crisis managers. The good news is that all organisations can prepare for crises. Although crises in all their details are usually unexpected, it is possible to identify potential crises, to develop scenarios on how to respond if various crises happen, and through that to shorten the response time and increase the likelihood that the right response strategies are chosen if and when a crisis hits. By being thoroughly prepared, an organisation can shape the actual crisis management. It also has a greater chance of influencing what information will be available. Finally, through research and relationship building it is possible to find out more about what evaluation criteria various stakeholders make use of. Taken together, preparations like these can increase the likelihood that an organisation is successful in shaping the perceived crisis management, and thus people's reactions when a crisis hits. The road towards successful crisis management begins with the insight that in the end, “it's the perceptions, stupid”. This insight should be perceived not as a sufficient, but as a necessary precondition for any successful crisis management. ■

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