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UNDERSTANDING CRISIS COMMUNICATION THEORY AND PRACTICE

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After reading this chapter you will be able to:

- 2.1 Utilize media theories to enhance your crisis communication
- 2.2 Employ organizational crisis communication theories to produce effective crisis communication

To define and better understand crises of all types, researchers have developed theories to understand and manage these events. Crises are studied by a wide variety of disciplines, including psychology (Morgan et al., 2002; Slovic, 1987), sociology (Chess, 2001; Clarke & Chess, 2008; Mileti & Peek, 2000; Mileti & Sorensen, 1990; Quarantelli, 1988), business (Mitroff, 2005; Mitroff & Anagnos, 2001; Weick, 1988; Weick & Sutcliffe, 2007), mathematics and physics (Bak, 1996; Lorenz, 1993; Mandelbrot, 1977), and political science (Birkland, 2006; Comfort et al., 2001; Ramo, 2009) among others. In addition, there are a number of practitioners who have written books about crisis communication (Reynolds, 2002; Witt & Morgan, 2002). James Lee Witt, former director of FEMA from 1993 to 2001, provides clear advice about effective crisis communication through his experiences managing major natural disasters. Barbara Reynolds provides a guide for crisis and emergency risk communication based on her considerable experience communicating about public health outbreaks around the world. Each of these disciplines and practitioners has contributed greatly to defining and better understanding how to manage crises (See Table 2.1).

Psychology, for instance, provides the theoretical background on mental model approaches to crisis communication and the social amplification of risk and crisis communication. These theories help us better understand how people cognitively perceive and ultimately respond to risk and crisis situations. Sociology provides theories on how to conduct community evacuations during all types of disasters and how communities respond to these disasters. The field of business examines the sensemaking processes of leadership before, during, and after a crisis; the role of organizational learning in response to crisis; as well as organizational structures that exemplify a crisis-prepared or crisis-prone organization. Mathematics and physics produced chaos and complexity theories that have been used widely in the communication discipline as metaphors

TABLE 2.1 ■ Academic Disciplines Contributing to Understanding of Risk and Crisis Communication

Discipline	Theory Contribution
Psychology	Mental models approach to risk and crisis communication Social amplification of risk and crisis perceptions
Sociology	Disaster evacuation theory Social response to disasters Social and institutional networks during disasters
Business	Organizational sensemaking theory Organizational learning theory High reliability organizational theory
Mathematics and physics	Chaos theory Complexity theory Sandpile/Self-organized criticality theory
Political science	Policy change theory and catastrophic disasters Deep security theory

for the disruption and self-organization produced by crisis events (Gilpin & Murphy, 2008; Murphy, 1996; Sellnow et al., 2002). Political science provides theories, such as Ramo’s (2009) deep security theory, that build on complexity and network theories for policymakers to prepare and respond to crises, such as terrorism. For full discussions of the interdisciplinary approach to crisis communication and the theoretical approaches associated with them, take a look at one of the recent handbooks on risk and crisis communication (Coombs & Holladay, 2010; Heath & O’Hair, 2009; Pearson et al., 2007). You will find that many of the lessons described in the upcoming chapters are grounded in the interdisciplinary research described above. However, the communication discipline has produced considerable research on crisis communication. What follows is a discussion of the several important theories of crisis communication. The first section examines the important role media theories provide in contributing to the understanding of crisis communication.

MEDIA THEORIES AND CRISIS COMMUNICATION

Considerable theory building in crisis communication has focused on the role of media in the life cycle of a crisis. In some cases, media coverage can amplify the public’s fear beyond what is reasonable (Pidgeon et al., 2003). Conversely, the media often moves

TABLE 2.2 ■ Media Theories Contributing to the Understanding of Crisis Communication

Theory	Characteristics
News framing	<p><u>Emphasizes</u> the degree to which the crisis is framed positively or negatively</p> <p><u>Focuses</u> on news reporting</p> <p><u>Features</u> messages by both the media and organizations (often contrasting) designed to frame the crisis</p>
Focusing events	<p><u>Emphasizes</u> policy decisions made in response to crisis events</p> <p><u>Focuses</u> on policy debates that are played out publicly</p> <p><u>Features</u> determining blame, the likelihood of similar crises in the future, and lessons learned</p>
News diffusion	<p><u>Emphasizes</u> the distribution of information in response to crises</p> <p><u>Focuses</u> on the speed and accuracy of messages shared</p> <p><u>Features</u> the diverse means through which people receive information and the resilience of those sources during crises</p>
Exemplification	<p><u>Emphasizes</u> the way audiences assess portrayals, such as risks to their safety and health, including the apprehensions they feel that lead to risk avoidance or to taking self-protective actions</p> <p><u>Focuses</u> on exemplars—brief, simple, and memorable messages, such as pictures, phrases, or emotional examples, that evoke a strong audience response, either positive or negative</p> <p><u>Features</u> messages of all kinds that include exemplars (e.g., news stories, photographs, Internet memes, public speeches, news conferences, etc.)</p>

beyond “environmental surveillance” to the point of “community building” to assist with the crisis recovery period (Wilkins, 1989, p. 33). In either case, the media is a prominent player, making a substantial impact during crises. For this reason, Seeger (2006) prioritizes forming partnerships with the media as a best practice of crisis communication. In this section, we review three theories that have been adapted through considerable research to explain the role the media plays during crises. These theoretical perspectives include news framing, focusing events, crisis news diffusion, and exemplification (See Table 2.2).

News Framing Theory

At the heart of news framing theory is the fact that “reporters and editors routinely choose among various approaches to the presentation of news stories” (Hook & Pu, 2006, p. 169). They approach selected results in a pattern of coverage that can frame a

topic positively or negatively. The controversy inherent in many crises often intensifies and polarizes the framing process. For example, an organization may seek to frame a crisis as an aberration or as unavoidable. Conversely, the media may frame the same crisis as having manifested from a lack of responsible caution on the part of the organization. This type of polarity in framing crises is not unusual.

The news framing process can have a profound impact on how readers and viewers perceive a crisis. For this reason, Holladay (2010) argues, “it is imperative that organizations participate in this framing process” (p. 161). If organizations remain passive in the framing process, they make themselves completely vulnerable to their adversaries who will likely strive to tip the media coverage of the crisis negatively. For example, a metropolitan hospital recently responded to a budget shortfall by laying off a large number of nurses. Area media reported on the layoffs, framing the budget issues as having been caused by administrative mismanagement. Worse, the stories often featured laid-off nurses with young children in tears over their impending financial hardship. Meanwhile, another hospital in the community offered to hire some of the nurses at comparable wages. The financially struggling hospital remained silent throughout the crisis. The hospital never fully recovered from the crisis and was eventually sold to another health management company. Had the hospital offered a competing explanation or frame for needing to lay off employees, the outcome might have been very different.

As the hospital example reveals, the framing process influences the public’s perception of the organizations afflicted with the crisis. If the crisis is framed in a way that reflects negatively on an organization, that organization’s ability to recover from the crisis is impaired or delayed. Hence, news framing theory advocates that organizations take an active role in the framing process.

Focusing Events

Focusing event theory is an extension of agenda-setting theory. *Agenda setting* refers to the way the media determines the importance of various news stories or political issues. The higher a story ranks on the media’s agenda, the more attention or coverage it receives. Crises become focusing events when they are high on the media’s agenda and the discussion moves from reporting on the cause and impact of the crisis to the reconsideration of existing policies or the consideration of new policies for preventing similar crises in the future.

Wood (2006) explains that focusing events include four consistent attributes. First, like all crises, they occur suddenly. Second, they are rare. Third, they garner large-scale attention. Finally, both the public and policymakers simultaneously prioritize them. Fishman (1999) argues that the combination of “a dramatic news event, and the media’s coverage of that event creates an urgency to take action” (p. 353). That action takes the form of policy debates and recommendations for revising current policies or developing new policies. For example, the tragic shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary

School in the village of Sandy Hook in Newtown, Connecticut, inspired considerable debate over gun laws. Although no meaningful change occurred on the national level, many communities revised existing policies regarding firearms and schools after the Sandy Hook crisis.

Policy debates stemming from focusing events are typically based on three topics: blame, normalcy, and learning. Questions of blame ask whether or not the crisis was caused by human or mechanical failures that could be addressed with policy changes. Questions focusing on normalcy address the extent to which the crisis is a manifestation of routine procedures. In Chapter 1, we discussed various types of recurring crises. A normal crisis would fit within this typology. Sadly, mass shootings, as discussed above, are repeated with enough frequency that they are considered normal and warrant policy debates. By contrast, novel crisis types are highly unusual and difficult to address through policy changes. For example, Ebola outbreaks occur rarely in parts of Africa. The virus causes grotesque bleeding and is almost always fatal. The occurrence of these outbreaks, however, has always been contained quickly. Finally, learning is central to policy debates. The changes in policy that occur in response to focusing events are, in essence, a manifestation of lessons learned from the crisis.

As we mentioned in Chapter 1, crises often lead to new opportunities for organizations and communities. Focusing events can provide the practical means for formalizing such opportunities into formal policies. Thus, focusing events inspire crisis communication that is dedicated to seizing the opportunity to improve public safety in the aftermath of a crisis.

Crisis News Diffusion

The shock and impact of crises create intense public interest. The media play a central role in diffusing or spreading that information. As crises emerge, the curious and concerned public often view television or Internet coverage continuously for extended periods of time. As McIntyre et al. (2011) explain, “media exposure is a popular method of coping with crises” (p. 303). Theories of crisis news diffusion seek to understand how and when people receive information about crises. News diffusion includes all channels of communication ranging from television and the Internet to newspapers, radio, and face-to-face interpersonal communication as well as all forms of social media.

The surprise and uncertainty during crises pose challenges for reporters. These trials are further intensified by the high demand for information. Those who study news diffusion are interested in the accuracy as well as the expediency of coverage. Social media resources such as Twitter address the void of information during crises. Crises such as COVID-19 reveal that many people experiencing and observing crises build networks and access information regularly via social media.

Mourad et al. (2020) studied the diffusion of COVID-19 information on social media networks. Their study confirmed that inaccurate information in the form of conspiracy theories spread extensively throughout the early stages of the pandemic.

They observed this information spread with little resistance as some users displayed a lack of trust in medical officials. They suggest that non-medical social media influencers, those with many followers, can and should play an active role in distributing accurate information during crises like COVID-19.

In another example, Brian Stelter, a *New York Times* reporter, happened to be near Joplin, Missouri, in 2011 when the town was destroyed by a massive tornado. The reporter had no access to traditional forms of media coverage. Using his smartphone, he was able to post photos and brief statements using Instagram and Twitter. These posts were viewed by thousands of people wanting information about the devastation in Joplin. The resilience displayed by the *New York Times* reporter in Joplin is a central feature of news diffusion research. For example, Spence et al. (2009) studied the preparation by local radio stations to continue broadcasting in the wake of a serious crisis, such as a tornado or flood. They found that the majority of stations surveyed had plans for remaining resilient and continuing to broadcast during natural disasters.

Two classic studies in crisis news diffusion occurred when President John F. Kennedy was assassinated in 1963 and when President Ronald Reagan was wounded in an assassination attempt in 1981. Nine out of 10 people surveyed knew President Kennedy was shot within an hour of the crisis (Greenberg, 1964). Nearly two decades later, the results were similar. Those surveyed after the Reagan attack were aware as quickly and mentioned interpersonal communication, television, and radio as their means of first learning about the crisis (Bantz et al., 1983). Today, the speed of crisis news diffusion is much faster. We can receive news alerts on our smartphones within minutes of a story having been confirmed by a news source. We can also share information much more quickly and efficiently through social media. Thus, new media channels have revitalized the study of crisis news diffusion.

In their Social Mediated Crisis Communication (SMCC) Model, Austin et al. (2012) offer a compelling description of how multifaceted information diffusion has become during crises. The SMCC Model accounts for both those who are active in creating and consuming information on social media as well as nonusers. They describe the role of influencers in spreading information online that is then shared in other interpersonal communicative contexts. The key point of the SMCC Model is that social media can have a reach far beyond those who regularly access social media platforms. Information shared online spreads directly to other users and indirectly to nonusers through all forms of human interaction. Thus, although social media networks are increasingly active during crises, our long-standing knowledge of news diffusion is still relevant.

Exemplification Theory

Crises, by their nature, evoke emotional responses, such as fear, anger, and disgust. Exemplification theory provides insight into how these emotional reactions are

communicated and remembered over time. The point of analysis for exemplification theory is on short, vivid, and emotionally arousing visual, written, or spoken messages known as exemplars. For example, alligators are seen regularly in residential areas surrounding the many lakes in Central Florida. Although rare, humans in or near the water are occasionally attacked by alligators in the region. Poisonous snakes are also intermittently present near the lakes. Residents and visitors are warned to avoid wading in these lakes by terse warnings posted on walking paths near the lakes. One version of the sign states simply, “Attention: Beware of Wildlife,” and includes a picture of an alligator and a snake. The strategy behind the exemplar contained in these signs is to produce a strong emotional reaction that will make people aware of the risk and motivate them to avoid the water. Simply put, exemplification theory examines “the formation and modification of beliefs about phenomena and issues” based on exemplars (Zillmann, 2006, p. S221).

Spence and his colleagues explain that exemplars influence the way people perceive threats to their well-being (Spence et al., 2015). They explain that people typically process risk information quickly and subjectively rather than slowly, analytically, and objectively. For this reason, the immediate reactions inspired by exemplars are often extremely persuasive. Returning to our example, simply seeing a picture of a snake and an alligator triggers a sense of caution in most residents as they walk near the water. Beyond warnings, exemplars can cause reputational crises for organizations. The mere mention of bed bugs, for example, is repulsive to most people. Thus, claims that bed bugs might be present in the rooms of a motel chain or apartment complex can immediately deter patrons. As we explain in Chapter 4, simply referring to a product using a derogatory exemplar can create a reputational crisis. In this case, a media reference to “lean finely textured beef” as “pink slime” spiraled into a full-blown crisis for Beef Products Incorporated. Unfortunately, even after such claims are proved false, a relationship between the exemplar and the organization can remain in the subconscious of potential customers (Westerman et al., 2012).

Crisis communicators need to be aware of the impact exemplars can have on the organizations they represent. The lasting images and their links to perceptions of the organization can cause lasting reputational harm. If, however, organizations provide a clear and credible response to such exemplars, organizations can minimize or reverse the harm. In two separate experiments, Spence and his colleagues, first, established the negative impact exemplars have on organizational reputations and second, provided clear evidence that responding to these exemplars through communication channels used frequently by viewers who were exposed to the exemplar can repair the reputational damage (Spence et al., 2015; Spence et al., 2016). The lesson for crisis communicators is to pay close attention to references to the organization, in both traditional and new media. When negative exemplars appear, a prompt response is warranted (Spence et al., 2017).

ORGANIZATIONAL THEORIES OF CRISIS COMMUNICATION

For the past 20 years, communication researchers have developed theoretical approaches for responding to organizational crises (see Table 2.3). This research includes corporate apoloia (Hearit, 2006), image repair theory (Benoit, 1995), situational crisis communication theory (Coombs & Holladay, 2002), and Organizational renewal theory (Ulmer et al., 2009). Corporate apoloia, image repair theory, and situational crisis communication theory identify strategies an organization can use to repair its image and reputation after a crisis. Organizational renewal focuses on learning from the crisis, communicating ethically, considering both the threat and the opportunities associated with the crisis, and creating a prospective vision. We briefly examine each of these research traditions.

Corporate Apoloia

Research on corporate apoloia was initially conceptualized as the speech of self-defense (Ware & Linkugel, 1973). Hearit (2001) defines an *apoloia* as not exactly

TABLE 2.3 ■ Theories of Crisis Communication

Theory	Characteristics
Corporate apoloia	<p><u>Emphasizes</u> managing the threat created by a persuasive attack against an organization</p> <p><u>Focuses</u> on an apology for wrongdoing</p> <p><u>Features</u> communication strategies for the apology</p>
Image repair theory	<p><u>Emphasizes</u> repairing the threat to the image of the accused</p> <p><u>Focuses</u> on accounting for organizational actions that caused the crisis</p> <p><u>Features</u> communication strategies for managing the account</p>
Situational crisis communication theory	<p><u>Emphasizes</u> lowering crisis attributions of responsibility for the crisis</p> <p><u>Focuses</u> on determining communication-based on the type of crisis and the organization's reputational assets</p> <p><u>Features</u> flow-chart decision-making process for using crisis response strategies to influence stakeholder perceptions or attributions of responsibility</p>
Organizational renewal theory	<p><u>Emphasizes</u> opportunities to learn and grow from the crisis</p> <p><u>Focuses</u> on creating opportunities inherent to crisis events</p> <p><u>Features</u> broad leadership and organizational communication guidelines, emphasizing strong positive values, an optimistic forward-looking perspective, and learning to overcome the crisis</p>

an apology but rather “a response to criticism that seeks to present a compelling competing account of organizational accusations” (p. 502). In this case, crises are created by an accusation of wrongdoing. Hearit and Courtright (2004) explain that apologetic crises “are the result of charges leveled by corporate actors (e.g., media or public interest groups) who contend that an organization is guilty of wrongdoing” (p. 210). Corporate apologia provides a list of communication strategies that the organization can use to respond to these accusations. These communication strategies include “denial, counterattack, differentiation, apology, and legal” (Hearit, 2006, p. 15). These strategies are primarily defensive and are designed principally for an organization to account for its actions after a crisis.

Image Repair Theory

Benoit (1995) developed a comprehensive theory of image repair. *Image* refers to how the organization is perceived by its stakeholders and public. Similar to corporate apologia, Benoit (1997) explains that “the key to understanding image repair strategies is to consider the nature of attacks or complaints that prompt such responses” (p. 178). He suggests that two components of the attack are essential. First, the organization must be “held responsible for an action” (Benoit, 1997, p. 178). Second, “that [action must be] considered offensive” (Benoit, 1997, p. 178). Benoit’s (1995) theory contains a list of 14 impression management strategies. Five major strategies include denial, evasion of responsibility, reducing the offensiveness of the event, corrective action, and mortification. Each strategy can be used individually or in combination (Sellnow & Ulmer, 1995; Sellnow et al., 1998). Consistent with corporate apologia, Benoit’s image repair strategies focus on how organizations respond to accusations or account for their actions after being accused of a transgression. An effective response is designed to repair the organization’s damaged image or reputation.

Situational Crisis Communication Theory

A third prominent theory on crisis communication is situational crisis communication theory (SCCT). Coombs developed this theory by linking attribution theory and crisis response strategies (Coombs, 2019; Coombs & Holladay, 2002). SCCT considers the type of crisis and ensuing reputational threat in order to select the appropriate crisis response strategy. The crisis response strategies in this approach are a synthesis of work on corporate apologia, impression management, and image repair theory. Coombs (2019) describes four major communication approaches, including denial, diminishment, rebuilding, and bolstering. In all, he delineates 10 crisis response strategies. The crisis communication strategies are then used according to the threat to the organization’s reputation based on the crisis type as well as the organization’s crisis history and prior reputation (Coombs, 2019).

Coombs (2019) explains that crisis type can be defined by three categories: victim cluster, accidental cluster, and preventable cluster. The victim cluster involves crises such as natural disasters, workplace violence, and malevolence. Accidental crises involve technical error accidents and technical error product harm. Preventable crises include human error, accidents, human error product harm, organizational misdeeds, and scandals (crises caused by scandals). Beyond crisis type, crisis response strategies should also be selected according to the organization's crisis history and prior reputation.

Crisis history and prior reputation are important because organizations that have recurring crises or poor reputations are not likely to have their messages accepted by stakeholders. Coombs's (2019) theory is based on the idea that, after a crisis, stakeholders assign blame and expect an organizational response. Depending on the crisis type, crisis history, and prior reputation, Coombs provides crisis response recommendations to address the attributions of responsibility toward the organization.

The Discourse of Renewal Theory

As you have seen in the previous three theories, much of the research on crisis communication focuses on managing the threat to the image or reputation of the organization during a crisis. We argue there is also potential for positive discourse following a crisis that emphasizes the opportunities inherent to crises. Reputation and image are important organizational concepts, but they do not always play a central role in resolving organizational crises. The upcoming cases in this book provide many examples in which rebuilding, learning, and opportunity are more important than reputation or image. For this reason, we argue that crises also carry the potential for opportunity. To illustrate this idea, we developed a theory we call the *Discourse of Renewal* that emphasizes learning growth and opportunity following crises of all types. We see four theoretical objectives central to the Discourse of Renewal: organizational learning, ethical communication, a prospective rather than retrospective vision, and sound organizational rhetoric. We discuss this theory in much more depth in the final chapter of the book. However, what follows is a brief description of each of the theoretical components of our theory.

Organizational Learning

We believe that an organization that emerges successfully from a crisis must learn from the event. Chapter 9 provides an in-depth understanding of how organizations and communities can learn through failures, including crises. It is also important that the organization illustrates to stakeholders how its learning will help ensure that it will not experience a similar crisis in the future.

Ethical Communication

A second key factor in creating a renewing response is communicating ethically before, during, and after the crisis. Organizations that have not prepared adequately for crisis

or are unethical in their business practices are going to have to account for those actions at some time. In fact, unethical actions are often the cause of a crisis. One of the key factors of a crisis is that it reveals the ethical values of the organization. Crises do not build character; they expose the character of the organization. If an organization is unethical before a crisis, those values are likely to be identified during the crisis. Organizations that institute strong, positive value positions, such as openness, honesty, responsibility, accountability, and trustworthiness with key organizational stakeholders before a crisis happens are best able to create renewal following the crisis. Chapter 11 provides an in-depth examination of the importance of ethical communication and the opportunities associated with this crisis communication.

Prospective Versus Retrospective Vision

The third feature of a renewing response is communication focused on the future rather than the past. Theories that emphasize image or reputation emphasize a retrospective vision focused on who is responsible. Organizations that want to create a renewing response are more prospective and emphasize focusing on the future, not on the past. They learn from their mistakes, infuse their communication with bold optimism, and stress rebuilding rather than issues of blame or fault. Chapter 12 provides a detailed examination of Organizational renewal theory and the importance of developing a prospective vision to communicate about crisis.

Effective Organizational Rhetoric

Managing a crisis most often involves communicating with stakeholders to construct and maintain perceptions of reality. Establishing renewal involves leaders motivating stakeholders to stay with the organization through the crisis as well as rebuilding the organization better than it was before. We advocate that leaders who hope to inspire others to embrace their views of crisis as an opportunity must establish themselves as models of optimism and commit to communicating ethically and responsibly. Effective organizational rhetoric then involves leadership with vision and a strong, positive reputation to effectively frame the crisis for stakeholders and persuade them to move beyond the event. The final chapter of this book examines communication strategies for developing sound organizational rhetoric during a crisis.

CRISIS COMMUNICATION THEORIES THAT DESCRIBE, EXPLAIN, AND PRESCRIBE

As you can see, there is considerable research from a communication perspective on how to manage and communicate about crises and disasters. In general, theories can describe communication, explain the effectiveness or ineffectiveness of communication, and prescribe how we should communicate. The media theories described in this chapter serve to describe and explain the role of media in framing, focusing, and setting

the agenda in crisis communication. The communication theories of corporate apology and image repair theory describe common responses to organizational crises and can be used to explain the effectiveness or ineffectiveness of those responses. The situational crisis communication theory describes, explains, and prescribes communication strategies to protect the reputation of organizations managing crises. Consistent with situational crisis communication theory, the discourse of renewal theory describes, explains, and prescribes effective responses to crisis. However, a central difference is the diminished role of threat to the reputation of the organization in the discourse of renewal. In many examples of renewal, issues of blame, culpability, image, or reputation never arise as dominant narratives following these types of crisis responses. What makes renewal responses so effective is they mobilize the support of stakeholders and give these groups a vision to follow to overcome the crisis. A crisis response that emphasizes a threat to the reputation of an organization typically lacks these qualities and often has the potential to extend the life cycle of the crisis. These organizations often suffer from what we call a *threat bias* in crisis communication.

Understanding and Defining the Threat Bias in Crisis Communication

We believe that an organization that is willing to view a crisis from a balanced perspective, including both threat and opportunity, has a much greater potential for recovering from a crisis. Despite this potential, we observe a persistent bias toward viewing crises solely from the perspective of threat in both theory and practice. As we mentioned at the outset of this chapter, threat is an important part of defining and understanding a crisis. However, we believe that researchers and practitioners often overemphasize and concentrate too much on the threat to an organization's reputation or image to respond effectively. What follows is a discussion of threat bias in defining effective crisis communication.

To avoid the threat bias exemplified in current crisis communication research, we suggest that crisis communicators mindfully define and examine crisis events from a more inclusive perspective. Nathan (2000a) explains the inclusive perspective we recommend:

[I]n crisis the threat dimensions are usually seen most quickly and are then acted upon, while the potential for opportunity lies dormant. When a crisis is anticipated or when it occurs, the manager should be able to see both threat *and* opportunity features before deciding how to proceed. (p. 4)

Nathan goes on to explain that our understanding of crisis and our crisis communication choices are inextricably linked. In fact, he suggests that focusing solely on the role of threat in crisis “promotes threat response that may, in turn, magnify and even intensify the state of [the] crisis” (Nathan, 2000b, p. 12). We argue that full consideration of both the potential threat and opportunity associated with crisis is a

more appropriate and effective way to think about and communicate about crises. For this reason, we argue for mindfully reconsidering our definitions of crisis to include the perceived threat as well as the potential for opportunity emerging from the crisis.

Crises, by their nature, are threats to the survival of organizations. Certainly, no organization should hope for a crisis simply to experience the opportunities described by the theory of renewal. Rather, crises are inherent and inevitable elements of the organizational experience. Those organizations that see crises solely as threats to their public images are likely to respond in defensive and potentially manipulative manners. This defensive posture, at best, offers one benefit—survival. We contend that a combined emphasis on the threat and opportunity of crises fosters the simultaneous benefits of survival and growth. This growth manifests itself in the organization's willingness to respond with rhetorical sensitivity, make ethical decisions, learn from the crisis, and focus on the future. As we have argued throughout this chapter, these elements exemplify a balanced approach to crisis. Applying these elements can produce an opportunity for renewal that far exceeds basic survival.

SUMMARY

In this book, we hope to convince you that effective crisis management is a natural and essential part of the organizing process. We believe that effective crisis planning and communication can enable organizational leaders to better cope with the surprise, threat, and short response time that are a part of all crises. Although there are many types of intentional and unintentional organizational crises, there are consistent strategies that can help an organization turn a crisis situation into an opportunity for improvement. All crises involve effective communication. Resisting the threat bias and understanding the skills needed to communicate effectively is the focus of the next section of this book. Understand that the lessons described in the upcoming chapters are based on well-established research and practice in the multidisciplinary field of research in crisis communication. Furthermore, the next section takes us from conceptually understanding crises and crisis communication theory and moves us toward improving our crisis communication skills. Good luck with this next section of the book.