

Looking for the silver lining

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ABSTRACT

This is a review of the second edition of the book *Effective crisis communications: Moving from crisis to opportunity* (2nd ed.) (Sage, 2011, 228 pages) by three university professors who have several books about crisis communications under their belt. The reviewer follows their examination of how to manage uncertainty and communicate and lead effectively during the heavy weather of crises, followed by a look at specific storms big and small, and wraps up by examining their theory of “discourse of renewal”, the potential for clear skies beyond for renewal and growth.

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Robert Ulmer, Timothy Sellnow and Matthew Seeger are long-time communications storm chasers. For the past 15 years these American professors have hunted down both small and big disasters, monitored their characteristics and observed how people and organizations are impacted and reacted – all through the camera lens of communications theory.

They have examined single focus storms such as a lumberyard fire, a tainted apple juice crisis and a YouTube hoax, as well as the behemoth disasters of the World Trade Center, Enron and Hurricane Katrina, to come to a new understanding of effective crisis communications response.

In this second edition of their 2007 book *Effective Crisis Communications: Moving from Crisis to Opportunity*, the trio have produced an updated hand-book that steps us through the heavy weather of crises to the potential for clear skies beyond.

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They have developed a central thesis that crisis communications can go beyond managing the current threat to create the potential for renewal and growth, an approach they call “Discourse of Renewal” and admit is “radical and unconventional” (p. xiii). The idea is that those organizations with positive, strong and ethical core values that follow effective crisis communications principles in a crisis will find potential for positives at the end of their crisis.

They do not focus on figuring out liability or responsibility for a crisis and protecting or repairing the organization’s image as in earlier communications theories of corporate apology, image repair or situational crisis communications. Those emphasize the hazards to organizational reputation and, they point out, suffer a “threat bias” in their communications plans.

Instead, Discourse of Renewal emphasizes ethical communication before, during and after the crisis; organizational learning from the crisis; effective strong, inspirational leadership and a future orientation. This type of response, they point out, rallies the support of participants and gives them a vision to follow to overcome the situation.

This book is an easy read; clear and direct, and steps through their argument with many examples.

As a starting point, they define crisis as surprise events that produce uncertainty, threaten reputation or high-priority goals and create opportunities not otherwise available. They define “intentional” crises caused by terrorism, poor employee relationships or risk management and, in particular, unethical leadership. There are “unintentional” crises from natural disasters, disease outbreaks, economic downturns and product or equipment failures.

The authors outline the issues of managing uncertainty, effective crisis communications and leadership, giving the top 10 key messages or “lessons” for each.

For those of managing uncertainty: they point out that beyond preparation for ambiguity through training, organizations must accept that crises may start quickly; not immediately respond with routine solutions that may not fit; and recognize the threat is perceptual and thus uneven among stakeholders. They point out communications must be done early and often, and not heighten ambiguity intentionally. They say the communicator must be prepared to defend the interpretation of the evidence around a crisis, and if it’s believed the organization is not responsible, the case must be built for who is responsible and why.

The first lesson on communicating effectively in crisis situations starts before anything happens with the development of truly equal partnerships with stakeholders.

In the crisis, the communicator must determine the goals for communic-

ation, which may often be broad statements to help guide decision-making. This is, it must be said, an important point for communicators who will always find it easier to steer through a situation with key goals or a set of tenets to provide parameters.

The authors continue, noting the communicator must acknowledge all stakeholders, including media, as partners in the situation; listen to them; communicate early and consistently. Interestingly, the authors advise against over reassuring stakeholders about the impact of the crisis, and avoiding absolute answers until sufficient information is available, as it is conflicting messages from authorities, not the bad news itself, that creates panic.

This is an intelligent approach. However, in many cases now, with the speed of social media and its ease in creating and spurring on suppositions made in a vacuum of information, crisis communicators not able to give absolute answers will have to also make decisions in how much they should attempt to dampen speculation.

The public, the authors point out, also need useful and practical statements on how they can be self-efficient in responding to the crisis. This backs up the reality that everyone wants to know whether they are impacted by the crisis and what they can and should do about the situation.

The authors' lessons on leadership recognize that leaders need to have developed a positive company reputation and created a reservoir of goodwill before a crisis. The key points of effective leadership are that leaders need to be visible, open and honest, adaptive to the contingencies of the crisis and work to co-operate with stakeholders and build consensus.

Most importantly, the authors then review different types of case studies from industrial accidents, terrorism, food-borne illness, natural disasters and financial crises. These studies, with both positive and negative results, are outlined for each type of crisis, demonstrating the impact of managing uncertainty, developing communications and the importance of crisis leadership. The reader is urged, through specific questions, to reflect on how each case study follows the lessons.

This is the most helpful but also most problematic part of the book, as they take their theory to examples of practice. These range from then New York City Mayor Rudy Giuliani's handling of uncertainty during 9/11 to make the city's residents feel more secure; the rebuilding of the town of Greensburg, Kansas after a tornado because of goodwill created through effective communications and the turnaround of bankrupt General Motors through effective crisis leadership.

It was, however, unsatisfying to find through other sources that in at least one example given of excellent leadership, results were not exactly as outlined

in this 2011 edition. After praising the effective leadership of a businessman who paid his staff throughout the rebuilding of the business after a 1995 fire, the authors do not mention the company went bankrupt in 2001.

Our storm chasers, in summing up their Discourse of Renewal theory, prick critics by recognizing several limitations to creating renewal after crisis. These start with a resistance to learning based on the culture of the organization, and mindlessness rather than an ability to be mindful during crises.

The authors practically undo all the good they have provided throughout the book when they also point out that their theory works best with certain types of crisis, such as those of natural disasters of fire or floods that clear space for renewal. This is quite disappointing as those natural disasters are only one type of the several types of unintentional crises they have delineated earlier, and includes none of the intentional crises.

Our authors also accept, without hesitation, that private rather than public companies are more likely to have a renewal response, as they have a greater entrepreneurial spirit and more autonomy to buy into change and learn as the result of a crisis.

In this, they may be wrong. They have little to back this point up and, in fact, several of their case study examples are of positive public institutional response including Giuliani's leadership in uncertainty during 9/11, Oklahoma Governor Frank Keating's effective communications during the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing and the leadership of Greensburg City Administrator Steve Hewitt and the city council after the 2007 tornado. In actuality, both political and public scrutiny of public institutions often requires they respond with the same, if not more, farsighted response to crises than private companies because they will be held accountable in both the short and long term.

But these criticisms of their recognition of their limitations must be put into perspective.

Although much of advice in this book for handling crisis communications may be found in other similar texts, these communications storm hunters do not dismiss the angst of any crisis, but give an excellent strategic perspective of the need to look holistically forward in times of crisis to find potential positives.

This trio puts the right emphasis on being prepared through good relationships; proactive two-way communications before as well as during the crisis; and strong leadership that learns to make changes so the event does not repeat, and that sees the opportunities inherent in these events. In short, they find the silver linings to those storm clouds.

References

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