

Rethinking the Single Spokesperson Model of Crisis Communication:

Recognizing the Need to Address Multiple Publics

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Abstract

This paper revisits the concept of the single spokesperson to disseminate information during crises when communicating with vulnerable or disparate stakeholder populations. We argue for the use of carefully chosen cultural spokespersons, representing various disparate populations, to disseminate crisis responses. The literature regarding crisis communication, the designation of crisis spokespersons, and intercultural communication literature is investigated.

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Organizational crisis is inevitable, yet plans can be made in advance to assist responses via crisis management (Coombs, 1999). The majority of current crisis communication literature highlights models of crisis, crisis management planning, and rhetorical crisis communication strategies. (Benoit, 1995; Coombs, 1998; Covello, 2003; Seeger, Sellnow & Ulmer, 2003; Senge, 1990; Weick, 1995). A leading lesson in the crisis management literature is the designation of a single spokesperson during crisis to disseminate information in a clear and concise manner to stakeholders.

The role of a spokesperson helps publics put a face to the event and also disseminates information to stakeholders in an effort to make sense of a crisis. Weick (1998) writes, “initial responses do more than set the tone; they determine the trajectory of the crisis. Since people know what they have done, only after they do it, people and their actions rapidly become part of the crisis” (p. 309). While there has been general agreement among crisis scholars that the single spokesperson provides the greatest opportunity for an organization to publicly manage a crisis, the purpose of this paper is to revisit the concept of the single spokesperson to disseminate information during crisis when communicating with vulnerable or disparate stakeholder populations. We posit that carefully chosen spokespersons, representing various disparate populations, would be more effective in disseminating crisis responses than the single spokesperson recommendation currently advocated. Thus, we investigate literature regarding crisis communication, designation of crisis spokespersons and intercultural communication literature.

Crisis Communication

Crisis is defined as, “an unusual event of overwhelming negative significance that carries a high level of risk, harm and opportunity for further loss” (Seeger, Sellnow, & Ulmer, 2003, p. 4). Characteristics of crisis include threat, quick response time and surprise (Seeger et al., 2003). It is because of these characteristics that organizations are encouraged to preplan for crises by enacting crisis management plans during the pre-crisis phase. Crisis management is, “a set of anticipatory measures that enables an organization to coordinate and control its response to an emergency” (Nudell & Antokol, 1988, p.21). Crisis communication plans help organizations plan for the inevitable and work to maintain organizational legitimacy with stakeholders during a disaster. When the inevitable becomes reality and organizations enter the crisis stage there are demands from stakeholders and media to promptly respond. How the organization responds can affect the legitimacy of the organization (Benoit, 1995; Cowden & Sellnow, 2002; Heath, 1997; Seeger et al., 2003).

Current literature advocates a pre-crisis strategy of establishing a crisis management team. Seeger and Ulmer (2002) advocate that such teams include personnel from, “public relations, legal affairs, operations, security, top management, a designated crisis spokesperson and others with appropriate skills and resources” (p. 158). The emphasis of this study examines the primary spokesperson which is consistent with current theoretical practice (Barton, 1993; Benoit, 1997; Heath, 1997; Seeger, Sellnow, & Ulmer, 1998) or the careful selection of experts and a designated spokesperson to disseminate clear and consistent information (Coombs, 1999; Novak & Barrett, *in press*). Who is designated as a spokesperson and how that spokesperson disseminates crisis

responses to stakeholders has yet to be fully examined when crisis teams are communicating with disparate populations.

Spokesperson Designation

As many as there are crises, there are representations of spokespersons. Some organizations have used company leaders with great success as in the case of a devastating fire at the Malden Mills textile factory. Here the C.E.O was the spokesperson and was able to frame the crisis as an opportunity for renewal for stakeholders (Seeger & Ulmer, 2002). There are examples, however, where the C.E.O. may not be the best spokesperson to issue a crisis response.

When the Exxon Valdez spilled an estimated 240,000 barrels of oil in the then naturally pristine waters of Prince William Sound, the Exxon C.E.O was lax in communicating with stakeholders. While some argue that Stevens' speech at the 1989 International Conference on Industrial and Organizational Crisis Management helped the oil industry avoid new policies, a key objective in crisis management (Johnson & Sellnow, 1995), the consensus is that Exxon administration appeared, at best, unconcerned, and at worst, insensitive (Marconi, 1992; Williams & Treadaway, 1992).

Still other organizations have used mass media as a spokesperson to manage crisis. During the Northwest Airline's (NWA) pilot's strike of 1998, a strike that shut down flight operations for 15 days, the airline used news releases and paid newspaper advertising to communicate with both the public stakeholders and the Air Line Pilots Association. The advertisements placed by NWA in the *Minneapolis Star and Tribune* served to place blame on the pilots for the strike that displaced an estimated two million passengers (Cowden & Sellnow, 2002). While the strike was later resolved, examination

of the use of issues advertising as crisis communication by NWA found the ads helped inform the public, but failed in persuading public opinion that NWA was justified.

There are other examples of using multiple spokespersons in crisis communication without success. The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's (CDC) were criticized for their response to the 2001 anthrax crisis. In this case, CDC failed to designate a primary spokesperson or specified and previously trained spokespersons. Instead a myriad of spokespersons in the CDC's anthrax crisis responded to the media, which "served to undermine the public health agency's authority and credibility and to exacerbate rather than mitigate the crisis" (Novak, & Barrett, *in press*). While this study may initially seem to bolster the concept of the single spokesperson, the error in the CDC crisis response can be more attributed to the lack of designating official spokespersons and proper protocol for information dissemination within the organization. We argue that relationships must be built in advance during the pre-crisis phases with members of disparate populations to avoid the miscommunications that can arise during actual crisis response. Who should be designated when addressing stakeholders of disparate populations?

The position of using a spokesperson affiliated with the ethnicity of the population is supported in the literature. Arpan (2002) found a correlation between the level of identification felt by an ethnic group and the enhanced receptivity they felt when exposed to crisis messages delivered by a spokesperson perceived to be similar to the ethnic group. She argues, "spokespersons with ethnic backgrounds different from audience members' might be well-received, but strength of ethnic identity among audience members should be considered before choosing a spokesperson" (p. 333). Of all

the current theoretical perspectives considered by crisis scholars, it is the postmodern viewpoint that begins the discussion of polyvocal dissemination of crisis information.

Tyler (2005) chastises current crisis communication practices of *being honest* and *telling truth*, stating these commands, “are not really recognizing or acknowledging either the communicator’s role of the audience’s role in creating meaning” (p. 568). Using a postmodernist perspective, she denounces the need to have scripts and command centers as part of crisis planning, arguing the most salient questions are, “Which stakeholders are likely to suffer the most, and how can their suffering be alleviated? This would not only be a more humane and ethical response than focusing on regaining control, it also has the potential to reduce legal liability, and might conceivably reduce the negative publicity” (p. 569).

While we do not reject the rigorous work scholars have built over the past 40 years of crisis communication research, we do concur that when communicating with a diverse population, using multiple spokespeople who represent and speak in patterns similar to intended audiences, and using language representative of the target audience, are topics meriting further investigation. To this end, we examine intercultural communication literature to further the argument of the need for multiple voices when disseminating information during crisis events.

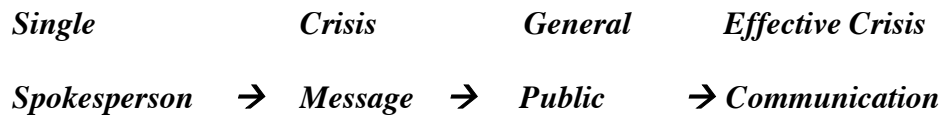
The Impact of Culture on Communication

The assumption behind the single spokesperson model is that one person presenting one message will be more effective in communicating information about how to respond to a crisis (Figure 1). This speaker-centered approach draws strength from what Klopf (1991) termed *projective cognitive similarity*, or the belief that “the person

with whom we are talking perceives, judges, thinks, and reasons the same way we do” (p. 223).

Figure 1

Single spokesperson model of crisis communication



This perspective provides some assurance that the public will receive a consistent message in times of crisis, much like what Rogers (2003) suggests is necessary for the successful dissemination of any new information into a social system. While this theoretical position seems logical; in reality, it is not practical because there is not just one public receiving a crisis message. Instead, there are multiple publics represented by a wide range of ethnic and cultural groups who are asked to receive the cross-cultural message uniformly and respond accordingly. Unfortunately, due to socio-cultural variables, their responses are often far from uniform.

Scholars in intercultural communication recognize the diversity of the multiple publics and have identified a number of factors that affect how culturally diverse groups send and receive messages. These factors range from macro to micro in scope, but all can change the way a crisis message is received. While the number of cultural factors affecting communication is staggering, we will use the four general categories of a

taxonomy developed by Sarbaugh (1979) to organize the discussion of culture's effects on communication because they offer clarity when applied to crisis messages communicated to diverse publics. These include code systems, perceptions about relationships and intent, knowing and accepting normative beliefs and values, and world view.

Code Systems

Code systems, or language variations, present a major challenge for effective intercultural communication. Distinctive features of language, different language rules, and alternative functions of languages are noted as cultural variables affecting communication. Ting-Toomey and Chung (2005) suggest that language is one culture-specific variable “governed by the *multilayered rules* [italics in original] developed by members of a particular sociocultural community” (p. 141). That being, the “arbitrariness, abstractness, meaning-centeredness, and creativity” of language makes communication across cultures a complex undertaking.

Drawing on the work of Ting-Toomey (1989), Fong (2006) identifies three approaches to understanding how culture influences language and communication. The developmental approach focuses on how language affects how people think; the interactional approach identifies how communication styles and norms in different cultures affect the people communicate; and the social-psychological approach investigates language choice in multilingual communication contexts, particularly first-language or second-language usage in majority and minority groups within communities (pp. 216-217).

The verbal style used by speakers also influences how messages are perceived. Some scholars have identified specific characteristics in the languages of various cultural groups. For example, Gudykunst and Ting-Toomey (1988) explain four variations of verbal communication styles that affect levels of understanding. The direct versus indirect style involves “the extent speakers reveal their intentions through explicit verbal communication” (p. 100). For some cultures, an elaborate versus succinct style affects the level of “rich, expressive language” used to communicate a message (p. 105). Another style involves the personal versus the contextual. Verbal style uses “certain linguistic devices to enhance the sense of ‘I’ identity, and verbal contextual style refers to the use of certain linguistic symbols to emphasize the sense of ‘role’ identity” (p. 109). Finally, the instrumental versus affective style is characterized as “sender-oriented” versus “receiver-oriented” in terms of the language used (p. 112).

Other scholars have provided insight about code systems and language choices more specific to particular cultures. Klopff (1991) offered details about the language patterns of international cultural groups, such as Japanese, Mexican, Arabs, Chinese, and Germans. Within the United States, Neuliep (2003) identified traits of Spanglish (the language of Hispanic Americans), Black English and Ebonics, as well as the languages of the Amish, and the Hmong.

These various perspectives pertaining to differing language styles and code systems offer specific advice for individuals engaged as spokespersons in time of crisis. Since each individual culture has specific elements associated with language, the use of one crisis message transmitted across cultures is an ineffective way to motivate individuals to respond appropriately to the crisis. Language differences and styles of

communication are likely to increase misunderstanding or result in non-compliance when crisis messages are transmitted unless these variables are taken into account. With only the single spokesperson presenting one message cross-culturally, individuals in the different cultural groups are unlikely to respond as directed.

Perceived Relationship and Intent

The way individuals view their relationship with members of other cultures, as well as the corresponding intent demonstrated by these communicators, can affect how messages are received. Hofstede (1991) identified broad four cultural patterns that influence how individuals perceive each other and respond to intercultural communication. These include: Power distance, individualism versus collectivism, uncertainty avoidance, and masculinity versus femininity.

With power distance, individuals perceive messages differently based upon their place within the social hierarchy, their relationship with authority figures, and the intent of the person sending the message. The degree to which individuals act independently, rather than acting as a member of a group can affect their receptivity to messages aimed at encouraging them to follow directions for the common good rather than for their own benefit. In a culture with higher levels of tolerance for ambiguity and uncertainty, the intent of a crisis message to take some action may have less urgency. Qualities associated with masculinity or femininity in cultures may also affect the receptivity of people to particular crisis messages as appearing more assertive than nurturing in their intent.

The effect of this variable on crisis communication is evident as the single spokesperson establishes a relationship based upon authority and power. This speaker-centered point of view distances the spokesperson from the different communities and

provides no guarantee that the publics will respond positively to the crisis message by following the official directives.

Knowing and Accepting Normative Beliefs and Values

Another aspect of intercultural communication involves the receptivity of the communicators to know and accept each other's beliefs and values. When the beliefs and values are known and accepted, positive intercultural communication is the result. If beliefs and values are not known, and not accepted, misunderstanding and distrust will occur. As a dimension of knowing and understanding these differences, Hall (1976) proposed that communication is divided into high context and low context systems. Depending upon an individual's cultural orientation, the manner of communication may be directly influenced. For example, in a high context culture, beliefs and values are understood and accepted without explicit explanation. In a low context culture, explicit information about the beliefs and values must be shared if there is to be knowledge and acceptance. Ting-Toomey and Chung (2005) classified these high and low context communication patterns, as follows: High context patterns reflect collectivist values (all understand), spiral logic (all thought is connected), indirect verbal style (no need to speak the obvious), understated or animated tone (nonverbal communication dominates), formal verbal style (demonstration of respect), and verbal reticence or silence (unwillingness to confront); and low context patterns include individualistic values (self-focused), linear logic (one step follows another), direct verbal style (willing to ask and tell), matter-of-fact tone (common expectation to get more information), informal verbal style (no one commands more respect than another), and verbal assertiveness or talkativeness (behavior demonstrates demand for information) (p. 170).

Harris and Moran (1991) suggest normative beliefs and values are influenced by the characteristics of a culture. Several characteristics specifically related to crisis communication include: Sense of self and space; food and feeding habits; time and time consciousness; values and norms; beliefs and attitudes; mental process and learning; and work habits (pp. 206-211). Each of these characteristics has the potential to affect how receivers of crisis messages know and accept them. For example, if a culture is informal and flexible, members may not respond to formal messages providing explicit instructions about how to behave in when dealing with a crisis. Beliefs and values pertaining to food safety vary since every culture differs in the way food is selected, prepared, presented, and eaten. The way individuals respond to time differs by culture: An immediate crisis in one culture may not carry the same urgency in another. Cultural values differ and norms of behavior vary regarding what is and is not considered acceptable. Related to these values are beliefs that shape how a crisis is viewed. For example, if a group believes that a supernatural power controls destiny, taking steps to protect oneself from a food-related crisis may be futile. The way individuals organize and process information also reflects their ability to respond to real versus potential threats to their safety. Finally, the practical importance of work to sustain daily life may make it difficult for individuals to change their behavior when confronted with a crisis.

In brief, for the crisis communicator, the more that is known about the normative beliefs and values of the publics receiving the crisis message, the greater the chance for those beliefs and values to be reflected in the message. As every characteristic of a culture has the potential to influence and reflect beliefs and values, the need for attention to this area of cultural variability is clear.

World View

Communication between cultures is further complicated due to the various ways people perceive and act in the world around them. Perceptions about the nature of life, purpose of life, and relationship of humans to the cosmos contribute to an individual's world view. Sarbaugh (1979) suggested that the nature of life refers to how humans experience their reality: "Questions of mind, body, and soul are aspects of the beliefs about the nature of life" (p. 43). The purpose of life involves how people should direct their efforts as they experience their lives. There may be as many different purposes identified, as there are individuals to name them. This could involve striving to control as much material wealth as possible or doing everything possible to avoid a crisis.

The relationship of humans to the cosmos has something to do with how we view our relationship with nature and the spiritual world. For example, humans may be subjugated to nature, be equal with nature, or attempt to dominate nature. From another perspective, individuals may feel controlled by a crisis, be up to the challenge of a crisis, or may want to control or manage a crisis. Ishii, Klopff, and Cooke (2006) discuss this in the context of fatalism versus control: Some cultural groups may view the crisis situation as beyond control while another group may consider themselves the masters of their destiny.

Another dimension of world view takes into consideration religious or spiritual aspects of a culture. Samovar and Porter (2001) identified six major religions affecting roughly 90 percent of the world's populations: Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Confucianism (p. 92). Each of these has different sacred writings,

authority figures, rituals, speculation, and ethics that shape how their followers identify with and understand messages related to their well being.

Some scholars suggest that value orientations contribute to world view and have a powerful influence on the way members of a culture perceive and respond to communication (Kluckhohn & Strodtbeck, 1961). Klopf (2000) believes that the way members of a culture perceive, think and speak is influenced by the way they view the world around them. Condon and Yousef (1975) examined the value orientations of different cultural groups and identified six dominant themes that help to explain how the hierarchy of values held by particular cultural groups complicates communication with multiple publics. These themes include: how the self is identified, the role of the family, societal expectations, elements of human nature, the relationship of people to nature, and the role of the supernatural. How individuals actually see themselves in relation to the other values within the themes contributes to what Schwartz (1992) referred to as value priorities.

In short, the differences in code systems, misperceptions about relationships and intent, conflicting points of view regarding normative beliefs and values, and differing world views provide ample support for crisis communication scholars to rethink the position that a single spokesperson can effectively communicate with multiple publics during a time of crisis.

Considering Culture in Crisis Communication

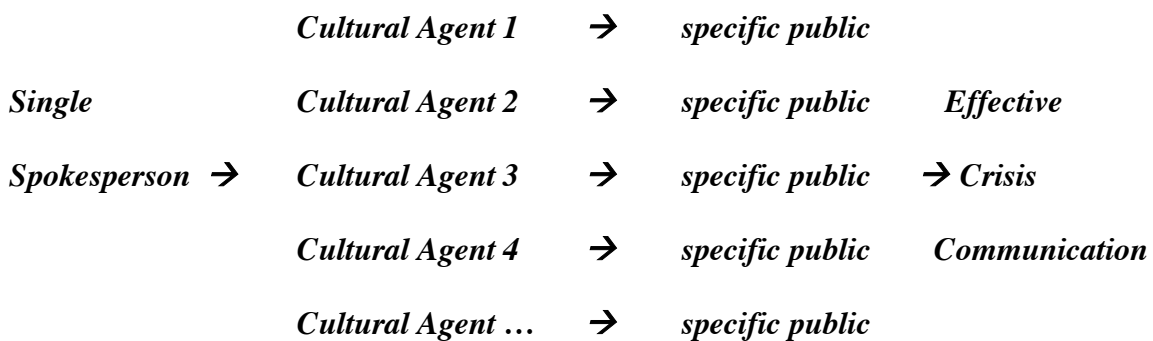
Samovar, Porter, and McDaniel (2006) suggest that in order to communicate effectively with people from diverse cultural backgrounds, an individual must have knowledge about the people from other cultures and a respect for their diversity (p. 99).

This said, the need to rethink the single-spokesperson model of crisis communication seems apparent. Under the established model (Figure 1), the single spokesperson presents the message to the public. Because the public is seen as a homogenous group, the single spokesperson is confident that the crisis message will be received as it is intended.

The reality of multiple publics complicates this model because of the cultural variables that may influence how the crisis message is perceived and acted upon.

Figure 2

Multiple spokesperson model of crisis communication



In the revised model (Figure 2), during the pre-crisis phase, relationships should be established with cultural agents drawn from the diverse publics who will be part of the message transmission if the risk becomes a crisis and a response is needed. The single spokesperson can still be at the center of the crisis and will likely serve as the contact person for the cultural agents who are ultimately responsible for presenting the crisis message in a meaningful way to members of their respective cultural groups. This alternative approach is audience-centered and responds to the needs of people to get information from those who seem more closely affiliated with them.

Gudykunst and Ting-Toomey (1988) developed a model for understanding the influence of cultural variability on communication in interpersonal settings. In the model, language, ecology, history, and communication affect the socio-cultural variables influencing social cognitive processes, situational factors, affect dimensions of communication, and habits of behavior. These elements lead to understanding and intention, ultimately producing communication with another person. The facilitating conditions stemming directly from the situational factors ultimately affect the communication. This model has utility for crisis communication in cross-cultural contexts because to communicate crisis messages effectively with multiple publics with differing cultural backgrounds, greater attention must be placed on the facilitating conditions (or the person's knowledge of those socio-cultural variables) influencing communication.

Concluding Thoughts

Historically, scholars in general and crisis scholars in particular have ignored domestic multiculturalism when developing crisis messages, operating under the following assumptions: Well-constructed messages appeal to a broad, homogenous audience; cultural groups are more similar than different; crisis messages can be constructed following an established pattern; and the best way to communicate about a crisis involves the use of a single spokesperson. Each of these assumptions can be mitigated by the literature of intercultural communication. There is no homogeneous audience; there are multiple publics. Cultural groups vary greatly with regard to language, perceptions about their place in society, normative beliefs and values, and world view. Equifinality establishes that there are many, equivalent ways to construct

crisis messages for different publics; and solutions that integrate cultural perspectives will be more effective in communicating crisis messages to diverse publics through multiple spokespeople (Adler, 1994).

The intercultural communication literature provides support for increased sensitivity to cultural variables when communicating with different publics. Among the findings are the following claims drawing support from the taxonomy developed by Sarbaugh (1979):

- The more diverse the publics, the less efficient a single spokesperson will be in communicating a crisis message.
- If spokespeople do not share a common code system (both verbal and nonverbal) or have a mechanism for translating into a common code with the particular publics, then the desired goal of communicating the seriousness of a crisis becomes less likely.
- If the relationship between the spokesperson and public is perceived to be friendly and helpful, the participants more likely will respond positively and follow the instructions for dealing with the crisis. Conversely, if the relationship has a hostile, dominant, disruptive tone, the less likely the participants will respond as instructed.
- If the intent shifts from helping to disrupting, there will be resistance to the crisis message.
- The more heterogeneous the relationship between the spokesperson and the diverse public, the probability of communication breakdown increases.

- If two participants have different patterns of beliefs and behaviors, they will respond differently to communication messages.
- If participants do not know and accept the normative beliefs and behaviors, the difficulty in carrying out the transaction increases and probability of communication breakdown increases.
- The greater the difference in world view, the more difficult it will be for a single spokesperson to convey the severity of the crisis.

Adler (1994) argues that government agencies and departments should cultivate cross-cultural awareness in all employees and develop multiple approaches to deal with particular situations as they develop, suggesting that “the culturally aware organization recognizes the cultural diversity in the population and is cognizant of the need to address that diversity” (p. 109).

The implication of this advice for crisis communication is powerful. Rather than using one approach exclusively when conveying crisis messages to multiple publics, this paper advocates the use of multiple spokespersons who can work with the central authority to disseminate crisis information quickly and meaningfully to culturally diverse stakeholders.

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