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## Antecedents of Internal Crisis Communication: A Conceptual Framework

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### Abstract

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This article is taking a conceptual approach to establish the relationship between organizational culture, leadership and social media content on internal crisis communication. The concept of internal crisis communication is relatively new, therefore the article will explore the stage of development of the concept and its contrast with other related concepts. Moreover, Complexity Theory will underpin the study to understand the consequences of minor signals that trigger Internal Crisis Communication. The paper finally offered a framework to guide public relations practitioners on the implications of Internal Crisis Communication on employee performance.

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**Keywords:** Internal crisis communication; leadership; organizational culture; social media.

### 1. Introduction

Postmodern tradition of crisis communication has identified internal crisis communication as a new area of study in crisis management (Heide, 2013). In the last three decades crisis communication researchers have fundamentally put attention on the external dimension of crisis communication (Johansen, Aggerholm, & Frandsen, 2012). Studies that investigated the external dimension of crisis communication can be synthesize into a well-established categories such as how organizations protected their reputation during crisis (Elliot, 2010; Coombs, 2007a; Coombs & Holladay, 2002), medium and spokesperson impact on stakeholder response to crisis communications strategies (Brown & Billings, 2013; Holladay, 2010; Coombs & Holladay, 2009), crisis communication strategies and audience perceptions (Coombs, 2007b; Benoit, 1997), audience oriented approach from different



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cultural perspective (Elmasry & Chaudhri, 2010; Lee, 2004), ethical standards in crisis communication (Austin & Jin 2015; Kim 2015), and leadership role in crisis event (Jamal & Bakar 2015; Jacques, 2012; Wooten & James, 2008).

The internal dimension of crisis communication has long been neglected within the field of crisis communication research (Heide & Simonsson, 2015; Heide, 2013; Frandsen & Johanssen, 2011; Taylor, 2010). Similarly, it has been highlighted that sensemaking of a crisis situation has been thoroughly investigated (Mazzie, Kim & Dell’Oro, 2012; Weick, 1988). Likewise, trust relationship as an antecedent to internal crisis communication has also been highlighted (Mazzie & Ravazzani, 2014; Mazzie & Ravazzani, 2011). Moreover, other studies have examined how crisis management plan impact on internal crisis communication (Heide & Simonsson, 2015). Furthermore, other aspect of internal crisis management that has been studied includes perceptions of employee reactions. To date little is known on the influence of organizational culture, social media content, and leadership on internal crisis communication.

Therefore, this paper proposed a framework for investigating the antecedents of internal crisis communication. The main objective of this paper is to explore the influence of Social Media Usage, Leadership, and Organization Culture on Internal Crisis Communication. In line with its objective the paper is divided into three sections with this section as an introduction. In the second part, we provide a relevant literature review on internal crisis communication in which conceptual framework and hypothesis where presented. The last part entails the conclusion.

## **2. Literature Review**

### *2.1. Internal Crisis Communication*

Recently scholars are calling for the needs to move away from the near-sightedness focus on external communication to the media and organizations instant problems, to other areas which include different stakeholders (Kent, 2010). Crisis does not happen as an isolated event, rather the process crisis evolvement as well as managed are closely related to internal communication processes (Heide & Simonsson, 2015; Taylor, 2010). Internal communication is a pedal that helps to prevent crises, create positive reactions, minimizes damage and eventually produces positive results (Mazzie & Ravazzani, 2013). Therefore, internal crisis communication is refers to as the connection between managers and employees through communication, in an organization before, during and after a crisis (Johansen, et al., 2012).

From a general perspective, (Frandsen & Johansen, 2011), explicate that practically internal crisis communication is seen as sender oriented focusing on how managers communicate with employees in crisis event. Moreover, earlier studies on internal crisis communication mainly pay attention on the psychological aspects of internal stakeholders. In particular, the study of (Weick, 1988) theory of retrospective sense making focusing on how organizational stakeholders understand and make sense about a crisis situation (Weick, 1988) has contribute immensely to the study of organizational internal dimension of crisis management, and crisis communication. Therefore, the communication aspect has been under-studied (Taylor, 2010). Similarly, Frandsen and Johansen (2011) further expanded that

theoretical orientation on internal crisis communication is lacking in extant literature. More recently, Olsson (2014) offered that organizations strictly govern by upward and downward communication, crisis management plans and centralized leadership, are basically concerned with reputation protection and control information flow internally as well as externally. On the other hand, organizations that understand dialogue as a way of sharing experience with stakeholders, depend on discussion, decentralization leadership and improvisation are resilience oriented. This highlight that organization with internal crisis communication orientation empowers employees. Table 1.0 highlight the comparison between external and internal crisis communication style of this organizations.

**Table 1.0:** Comparison between external Crisis Communication and Internal Crisis Communication

Items	External crisis communication	Internal crisis communication
Crisis stages emphasis	Acute stage	All the three stages
Knowledge interest	Finding generalizable Law-like results	Broadening the understanding of the intricacy of crisis
Perception of management	Managerialism, plans and checklist	Complexity and improvising
View of communication	Transmission-oriented	Sense making-oriented
Relationship with stakeholders	Asymmetrical	Symmetrical
Perception of crisis	Unattached situation with objective, self-evident meaning	Crisis is a social construction, a perceptual view.

Source: *Adapted from Heide and Simonsson, (2015)*

Although the stage approach has been given attention externally, in particular recent trends have shown criticize this approach of been linear and too simplistic (Frandsen & Johansen, 2011). Meanwhile, they maintain that it can be used as an ad hoc procedure for better understanding of ICC. During the pre-crisis stage employees scan for warning signals or trigger events within the organization. Meanwhile, during the crisis stage internal crisis communication emphasis on the organizations to engage in improvisation during crisis event (Frandsen & Johansen, 2011). In particular, Frandsen and Johansen, (2011) argued that it is easy to get stuck in a detailed plans and standard procedures. In similar vein, Heide and Simonsson (2014) assert that every crisis is unique therefore organizations should not put much attention on crisis management plan but to be able to improvise. Despite the fact that improvisation can be seen to be flexible and accommodative it does not signify it is a haphazard and spontaneous process (Heide and Simonsson, 2011), but rather a process that require experience and knowledge as well as flexibility and trust among organizational members (Heide and Simonsson, 2014). Thus knowledge and experience comes from the employee who can detect warning signs of crisis appearing at the pre-crisis stage. Moreover, Heide and Simonsson (2014) concluded that post-crisis stage is concern with resilience and organization learning which involves finding out what went wrong and how to prevent similar crisis from occurring. In line with Coombs and Holladay,(2002), (Mazzie & Ravazzani, 2013) develop a model for Internal Crisis Communication strategies which are largely drawn from psychology literature which include objectives and contents as technique of disseminating crisis messages internally.

## 2.2. Antecedents of Internal Crisis Communication

### 2.2.1. Organizational Culture

Theory of organizational culture offered that culture is a context specific construct due to different norms and values among organizations Allaire and Firsirotu, (1984). This evidence highlighted that each organization has its own culture which in essence could have influence on the ways organizations react to internal crisis communication. Related to this concern, several scholars have indicated organizational culture as one of the possible antecedent of internal crisis communication (Heide, 2013; Frandsen & Johansen, 2011). More specifically, organizational culture is highlighted to have positive or negative impact in all the stages of organizational crisis life cycle (Frandsen & Johansen, 2011). The organizational culture entails the process an organization views, recall and make sense of crisis, and how they accept mistake as well (Frandsen & Johansen, 2011).

The notion of organizational culture is crucial in getting insight on organizational operations scholars have often emphasis (O'Reilly, Chatman & Caldwell, 1991). Though, the influence of organizational culture has been investigated in relation to other constructs, e.g. organizational culture and performance (Mohamad, 2013; Jo Hatch & Schultz, 1992), organizational culture and corporate communication management (Mohamad, 2013; Jo Hatch & Schultz, 1992), crisis culture in private organizations (Olsson, 2014). However, empirical evidence on the influence of organizational culture on internal crisis communication is lacking in extant literature. Thus, this study tends to cover this gap by providing empirical evidence of organizational culture as an antecedent to internal crisis communication. Therefore, the following hypothesis is developed:

***H1: Organizational Culture has significant influence on internal crisis communication***

### 2.2.2. Social Media Content

The emergence of social media and its complexities have brought a new line of research in all aspects of public relations. In particular, stakeholders have recently become active participant during crisis due to the presence of social media, which in turn have put new pressure on organization during crisis event (Coombs & Holladay, 2010). Despite the above challenge, social media has provided the opportunity for interaction which makes it realistic for organizations to actualize the ideal symmetric communication (Heide & Simonsson, 2011). As it has been often indicated, crisis period is characterized by quick dissemination of information to the stakeholders (Caldiero, Taylor, & Ungureanu, 2010). Therefore, information technology tools have created an easy channel for organizations to dialogue with their stakeholders at an inexpensive rate with a remarkable speed. In addition, such content includes messages, videos, pictures, wall postings, notification, news updates (White, 2011).

Moreover, studies have indicate that employees frequently get to know about negative issues regarding their organizations through the mass media, and particularly the internet which is an important source for more information (Korn & Einwiller, 2013). As highlighted by Complexity Theory social media can serve as a tool to identify issues that can trigger crisis. Despite scholars growing interest in unveiling the impact of social media on crisis communication and crisis

management, there is still no clear understanding of the its influence on internal crisis communication. Therefore, the following hypothesis is formulated.

**H2: Social Media content has significant influence on internal crisis communication**

### 2.2.3. Leadership

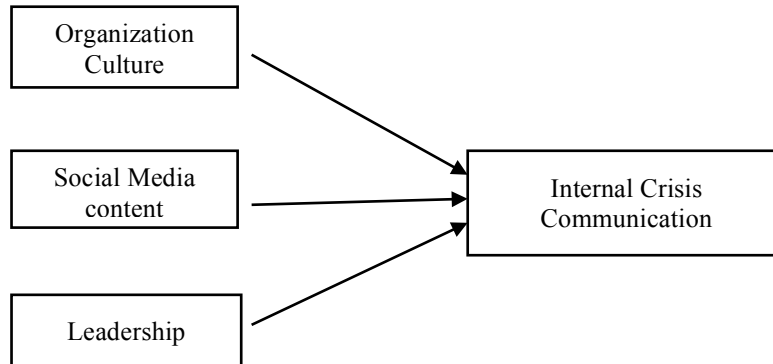
In identification of the internal factors that are related to internal crisis communication and crisis management, (Heide, 2013) highlighted that one of the key antecedent of internal crisis communication is leadership. Leadership seen as a mutual, collective process rather than a one man show (Heide & Simonsson, 2015). Similarly, during crisis event communication from the top management becomes very crucial. Hence, the difference between a crisis manager and a crisis leader can be seen as managers do things right while on the other hand, leaders always engage in motivating, influencing and inspiring employees (Yukl, 1999). Complexity Theory has offered that uprooting crisis is an internal process which can be associated to leadership qualities. According to (Yukl, 1989) traditional leadership theories relate to the notion rational processes, while theories of charismatic and transformational leadership stress on values and emotions. Transformational leader makes his subordinates aware of the importance and value of work and also encourage them to think beyond self-interest (Yukl, 1989). In fact, Bass, (1999) offered that transformational leadership have shifted organizational responsibility from the top to the flat bottom. Putting it differently, from a postmodern perspective in crisis communication leader and employees are seen as the same implying they are all co-workers of the organization performing similar duty (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2003). In essence, transformational leadership encourages sense making and sense-giving which are the most important concerns in handling crisis in the pre-crisis stage.

Meanwhile, (Heide, 2013) maintain that successful organization is the outcome of good leadership that is the capacity of leaders to make pragmatic decision in the time of chaos. In similar vein, Wooten and James, (2004) argued that the success of controlling organizational crisis is directly laying on the leadership attitude that motivates members to actively engage in organizational sense making. The pre-crisis stage involves the leader's ability to communicate and scan for warning signals understanding this abilities helps to predict how leaders will react during crisis (Anthonissen, 2008). Moreover, in the acute phase, that is when the unforeseen has occurred leaders are expected to mitigate the damage or lessen the severity of the damage using crisis response strategies (Coombs & Holladay, 2002). While, in the post crisis stage plans should be made for business continuity and organizational leaders should motivate internal stakeholders on organizational learning as well as lessons from the crisis (Coombs & Holladay, 2010). Though, the leadership as a construct has been examine in relation to organizational crisis Dufrene and Lehman (2014) however the influence of leadership on internal crisis communication has largely been neglected. Therefore, in line with above argument, the following hypothesis is developed.

**H3: leadership has significant influence on internal crisis communication**

### 2.3. Proposed Theoretical Framework

In this section we first offer a diagram for the proposed framework, then we discuss on the underpinning theory for the study.



**Fig. 1.** Proposed Framework

The study proposed a survey methodology through employees in public institutions to enable understanding of their views on antecedents of internal crises communication.

Moreover, as highlighted in the earlier section complexity theory will be the underpinning theory for the study. Complexity theory offers a framework dealing with more complicated view of crises with strong attention on crisis symptoms, scanning for trigger issues that are internal to the organization as well as the relationship with stakeholders in organizational operating environment (Murphy, 2008). In addition, the framework explain the basics to uproot poorly control crises that are common in the society such a corruption in government, management and religious institution. Complexity Theory posited that complex systems are highly unpredictable; therefore small changes can produce large consequences. Complexity emphasizes on the genesis of the crisis within the organization, making internal stakeholders the most vital unit of investigation (Heide, 2013).

### 3. Conclusion

The study will contribute to the literature on Situational Crisis Communication Theory, and Theory of Retrospective Sense making. The paper proposed a framework for investigating the antecedents (crisis responsibility, social media content, and organization culture) of internal crisis communication. Therefore, if it is validated it will provide important implication to researchers, policymakers and practitioners, thus, the researcher intents to validate the proposed model. The framework will also offer techniques of resolving internal crisis communication and improving organizational cohesion as well as controlling negative reaction that can trigger crisis.

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