



## The Communication Management in a Crisis Environment

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The world in which we live is widely dominated by quick, instantaneous and effective communication tools, such as the Internet, social networks and satellite Television. If this ability to communicate can enhance the dissemination of information almost to every place in the world, it is also true that it is now easier to cause misinformation and, as a result, negatively influence critical environments. Every organisation must have a structure with procedures and tools able to face a communication crisis. The NATO-military management of crisis communications can be considered a priority for media engagement by the Public Affairs.

### **Social-human feeling influences when facing a communication crisis**

The communication crisis occurs either when a wrong or false message reaches an audience or when a true message is misinterpreted. When facing a crisis, human beings follow specific cultural and social roles which contain stereotyped meanings: the so called thematic roles. It is worth noting how the same topic covers a different role depending on the crisis environment. In cases of crisis between man and environment (natural disaster), the natural environment, for example, is always seen as the "bad guy" and the man as the "good guy". But the thematic role "man", vice versa, covers both the role of bad and good guy during a crisis between men. The two boxes below show and explain the differences between the specific thematic roles:



**CRISIS BETWEEN THE MAN AND THE NATURAL ENVIRONMENT (NATURAL DISASTER)**

**THEMATIC ROLES**

- Wickedness: ENVIRONMENT
- Victim: MAN
- Damage: LOST OF THE VICTIM
- Saver subject: INSTITUTIONS
- Qualifying test: RESCUE, SAFETY
- Committed persons: MEN ECONOMICALLY, AFFECTIVELY OR CRITICALLY COMMITTED
- Story tellers: MEDIA

**CRISIS BETWEEN MEN**

**THEMATIC ROLES**

- Wickedness: MAN
- Victim: MAN
- Damage: LOST OF THE VICTIM
- Saver subject: INSTITUTIONS
- Qualifying test: ACTIONS TAKEN
- Committed persons: MEN ECONOMICALLY, AFFECTIVELY OR CRITICALLY COMMITTED
- Story tellers: MEDIA

### **Preparation of a crisis management panel**

A Communication crisis is unpredictable. It has a strong impact on media, embracing the public opinion and spread rapidly. A well organised structure in charge of dealing with a crisis must be able to think the unthinkable. If any organisation faces a crisis without any preparation, it will be overwhelmed by panic, a state of siege and management incapability. This is what makes the difference between the so called crisis-prone organisations and



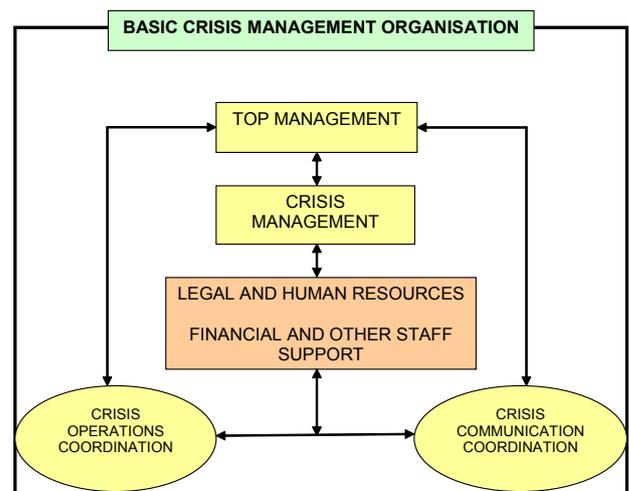
## ON EXERCISES AND DOCTRINE

the crisis-prepared ones. It is fundamental for a military structure such as NATO that the Public Affairs Offices foresee a “basic crisis management organisation”. The crisis management consists of a series of coordinated actions to rebuild the credibility, the authority and the reputation lost during the crisis of communication. The following chart shows how an integrated system of crisis management can be structured:

It is easy to understand how the branches which work in this crisis management organisation must be linked each other, and the flow of information among them must be continuously updated. Every one must know every thing and must be updated on every change in situation.

The best way to activate a cycle of crisis solving is to follow 4 steps:

1. **Activate a procedure**, developing an event reporting system. During this step, the coordinator of the crisis panel must be able to quickly link with the responsible branch for an immediate and unequivocal answer to the crisis. After that, the state of crisis can be declared and its seriousness evaluated.
2. **Issue management**: during this step the staff involved must manage the areas of vulnerability. It is necessary to think of the most remote hypothesis, and manage them together, conducting rehearsals and war gaming to test the correct procedures of communication.
3. **Prepare the communication tools**: think of a series of key messages and talking points, and then create a document with questions and answers. These tools will represent an easy path to follow, which can help whoever is asked by media to give an answer regarding the problem. The lessons learned during this phase can be added to a **crisis handbook**, which represents the point of reference in case of other critical events.
4. **Create a stakeholders database**: think of all the external structures, organisations, companies, institutions, media, public opinion, etc. involved during the crisis, highlighting their characteristics, history and background, posture during the crisis.



### **NATO Media Public Affairs approach and the NATO Media Information Centre**

The crisis management can be considered a sort of “art”, the art to work with media when an event can have or, in the worst case, already has had a strong impact on the stakeholders, trying to avoid the loss of image of the organisation involved. The stakeholders are those organisations, publics, companies with an interest (positive or negative) towards the organisation affected by the crisis. NATO Public Affairs or other NATO representative charged with being a spokesman can be effective in managing the media assault during a crisis by being “proactive”. The Media are always eager for news and information, and, in order to avoid speculation, it is advisable to continuously feed them, checking the truth of the news released and facilitating their work. A good tool that NATO Public Affairs can use to manage the above mentioned “media assault” is the so called “**Media Information Centre - MIC**”. This centre, always located outside restricted areas, has the capability “to host and inform the journalists and other media representatives”<sup>1</sup>, providing them with any kind of logistic and operational support:

- The Internet, telephone or fax connections, useful to quickly send reports to networks;
- A work space, furnished with food and beverages (coffee the most important!);
- Spokesmen with outstanding skill-sets to face the media (good speech and body language ability);
- Conference room where they can receive updates on all issues.

To limit the effects of a crisis, it is vital that the media are engaged before they engage us, thus preventing speculation or the possibility that they perceive a hidden agenda or story. The media must be able to assume

transparency on the behalf of the PAO, this is characterised by the **3 C**:

1. **CANDOR**: Public Affairs must show sincerity, frankness, genuineness, objectivity;
2. **CONCERN**: Those in charge must demonstrate an intent, preoccupation, participation and readiness to seek a solution to the problem;
3. **COURAGE**: it is important not to hide the problems but show courage and self-confidence.

## **The Internet**

The use of the Internet as a tool to help in the crisis solving process is one of the main aspects to keep in consideration. This is important especially in the modern era when every place in the world, even the most remote, can be linked with the core of the information by the web. This is the reason why it is useful to build up a "dark web site", created "ad hoc" to face the critical moment. The audiences, not only media, can find on this web site updated news and information about the development of the situation. Also the monitoring of the social networks and the opening of dedicated accounts on them is an excellent tool of information. These social networks such as "facebook" or "photobug" or "twitter" allow the users to upload files, images, videos which can directly show to the audience how the situation is going on<sup>2</sup>.

In any case, it is basic to follow the **6 W** when facing a crisis:

1. **WHERE**: in what context the communication management must be directed, taking into consideration both the event and the proper communication system;
2. **WHY**: identify the reasons for the communication;
3. **WHO**: refers to the subject of the communication, which is the organisation affected by the critical event?
4. **WHOM**: refers to the audience whom the communication must be directed to;
5. **WHEN**: the moment when the communication process occurs, taking into consideration its timeline;
6. **WHAT**: the message to pass to the audience and to the media.



## **Conclusions**

For a military organisation such as the NATO the capability to rely on expert professionals trained on crisis communication problem solving is vital. This is much more important on operations, when we are in dangerous situations.

Correct and real time information flow can negate speculation by the media and thereby avoid any subsequent communication crisis. The passage of information must start from the relevant organisation to the stakeholders. A communication crisis, is caused when the stakeholders lack visibility and knowledge of a situation and is left to speculate, misinterpret and guess in a bid to understand the environment in which it find itself.

<sup>1</sup> NATO Military Public Affairs Policy, MC 0457/1, September 2007.

<sup>2</sup> For more information, ACO PA Handbook, summer 2008.