

Crisis Management strategy utilized by the United States Department of Defense following the terrorist attack on America: A case study

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study uses a case study approach to evaluate the actions taken by the Department of Defense (DOD) following the terrorist attacks on America, and contrast them with past crisis management failures of other organizations to define and further develop the elements of an effective crisis response strategy. A thematic analysis was utilized to describe the effective use of crisis management within news transcripts of media events following the attacks, and to identify additional themes that have emerged in response to the unexpected presence of terrorism in America. This research concludes that the DOD effectively responded to the crisis, and in doing so enhanced its image in the eyes of the nation.

INTRODUCTION

On the morning of September 11, America was shocked by terrorist attacks that brought part of the Pentagon and several of the World Trade Center buildings crashing down. Four hijacked planes destroyed the major American landmarks, leaving the United States Government scrambling to defend and protect itself, while simultaneously managing an unexpected national crisis situation.

Recognizing and preventing crisis situations has been the focus of much research. "However it is a mistake to believe an organization can avoid or prevent all possible crises" (Coombs, 1999, p. 125). Crisis management and response research has been recently criticized for failing to empirically back its claims. Coombs (1999) argues past research in communication and business have offered "advice about what crisis managers should do, but rarely provide verifiable support for the recommendations" (p. 125). This research attempts to provide empirical backing that demonstrates appropriate crisis management and response. Empirical backing will be created by testing the suggestions for effectively handling crisis situations found in previous research through a case analysis on the U.S. Department of Defense's response to the terrorist attacks on America. This analysis should provide evidence of effective crisis management, thus crisis management response will become stronger and more effective.

This research examines past United States government efforts to manage crisis situations. The literature review presents the findings of past research in order to define crisis management and identify the elements of successful crisis management strategy. A review of America's history with crises will provide the rationale for determining how to successfully react to crises. This research will use a qualitative case analysis approach to compare those

strategies to the actions taken by the United States Department of Defense following the terrorist attacks. In general, this study will answer Coombs' (1999) call for verifiable support for crisis management recommendations, furthering our understanding of crisis management strategy and communication.

Review of Literature

Crisis management strategy

Several studies have produced strong arguments in an effort to define the ideal crisis management approach. Kauffman (2000) claimed "organizations facing a crisis should at least do the following: 1) respond quickly; 2) tell the truth; and 3) provide a constant flow of information, especially to key publics" (p. 422). Research done by Fines (1985) added the element of advanced planning and training: "1) set a broad strategy in advance; 2) respond quickly; 3) train spokespersons in advance; 4) seek third party support; and 5) centralize the spokesperson's function" (p. 53). Coombs (1999) generalized effective crisis response strategy into two key elements: compassion and information. He further claimed crisis managers must provide crisis-related information to stakeholders and demonstrate compassion for victims. Reporting this information, however, is a complex undertaking.

Quick, prompt responses to crisis situations are crucial. By responding quickly, public relations practitioners, not media, fill "the information void created by a crisis with facts. Speculation and misinformation will fill the information void if an organization is silent or slow to respond" (Coombs, 1999, p. 126). After a quick response, information must continue to flow out of the organization in an open and constant manner. "Openness means organizational members are available and willing to disclose information to the media and other stakeholders" (Coombs, 1999, p. 127).

Yet public relations practitioners must be careful, because knowing too much may lead the public to suspect you could have done something more to prevent the incident. Coombs (1999) found that an increase of "information specificity lead to stronger perceptions of personal control. This meant the more detailed information stakeholders received, the more they felt the organization could have prevented the crisis" (p. 137). "Publics will make attributions about the cause of a crisis. The more the publics attribute responsibility for the crisis to the organization, the greater the risk should be of reputational damage" (Coombs & Holladay, 1996, p. 292).

Messages coming out of the organization, preferably through a designated spokesperson, must be honest and consistent in content. During crisis, the relationship that exists between media and the organization is critical. According to Williams and Olaniran (1998), "when a crisis does occur it is important that these information gatekeepers perceive the company and its public relations personnel as dependable and believable" (p. 389). They further note that this is more easily accomplished when "the groundwork has already been set with previous positive relationships" (p. 389).

Probably the most effective part of the above strategy is the display of compassion. "Compassion helps to improve the organizational reputation, to increase honoring of the account, and to facilitate intentions to engage in potential support behavior. There appears to be little if any social-oriented downside to expressing compassion during an accident crisis" (Coombs, 1999, p. 135). Furthermore, compassion "was related to perceptions of organizational control. A possible explanation is the compassion conditions inclusion of taking action, such as finding and paying for housing. The mere taking of action could be the reason compassion is linked to control" (Coombs, 1999, p. 135).

Lastly, the organization needs to centralize a trained spokesperson, and designate his or her function to help ensure consistency in the information being released by the organization. The designated spokesperson should have credibility in the public associated with the organization. The crisis management team is “usually headed by the organization’s president or other executive officer, although the actual company spokesperson identified in the crisis management plan was the president or chairman of the company (24%), the vice president or director of public relations, corporate communications, or media relations (44%), and others (32%)” (Lee, Jares, & Heath, 1999, p. 245).

Previous study of crisis management

Governmental agencies in the United States do not have a good track record of publicly responding to crises. In fact, one of the most well known crisis management blunders is seen in NASA’s attempt to manage the public’s response to the preflight fire in the capsule of Apollo 1. NASA did a poor job of responding quickly to the public. In fact, Kauffman (2000) notes it took NASA two hours to report the deaths, and then communicated purposefully misleading information. “NASA responded too slowly to the fire, angering the media and allowing rumors to circulate about NASA’s possible culpability” (Kauffman, 2000, p. 429). “NASA’s crisis communications regarding the Apollo 1 fire exacerbated the tragedy, hurting the agency’s credibility and tarnishing an image the agency had labored 9 years to create” (p. 422).

The Challenger explosion 19 years later was further evidence that NASA had not learned from its mistake. Crisis management plans NASA claimed to have created following the mismanagement of the Apollo 1 crisis were ignored, and the agency again resorted to a media blackout. “It took more than six hours for the agency to release its first statement following the explosion of the Challenger” (Marra, 1998, p. 468). Surprisingly, NASA is not alone in its failure to prepare for crisis situations. “Research revealed that the majority of Fortune 100 companies will not take efforts to prepare for a crisis until they experience a crisis” (Williams & Olaniran, 1998, p. 387).

A final example directly linked to our government was the Cuban Missile Crisis. “The Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962 provides a case study of how John F. Kennedy and Nikita Khrushchev almost blundered into a nuclear war through the crisis management approaches of their advisory systems” (Pious, 2001, p. 81). While some experts claim the crisis was managed in an effective manner in the sense that it was successful, “crisis management requires reasonably high capabilities to acquire, manage, and process data rationally in accordance with effective theories about how the world works. Neither government demonstrated such capabilities” (Pious, 2001, p. 91).

Fortunately, there is also an example of previous crisis management success. Johnson & Johnson experienced a dangerous crisis when a terrorist poisoned Tylenol bottles with cyanide. Yet, the company enhanced its image through effective management of crisis. “Johnson & Johnson’s experience with the Tylenol poisonings suggests that outstanding crisis communications can enhance an organization’s image and credibility” (Kauffman, 1999, p. 430). “Organizations that have managed crises well such as AT&T and Johnson & Johnson, did so, in part, because the senior public relations practitioner was inside the boardroom helping to set strategy, not outside the boardroom waiting to be told what to do” (Marra, 1998, p. 473).

Crisis management and strategy research has become a critical responsibility for organizations across the country. Research has focused on past efforts to control crisis situations through several different strategies. By reviewing literature in this area, public relations prac-

tioners can learn from the successes and mistakes of others and revise their approach to crisis situations. The evidence from previous research, as demonstrated by the literature review, suggests that crisis management is an area in need of further development and analysis. The September 11 terrorist attack on America is our nation's most recent opportunity to determine if the United States government has learned from past mistakes, and if so, to identify which actions taken by the Department of Defense met with the elements of successful crisis management strategy. By conducting case studies of historical attempts to respond to crises, a more supportable strategy for effective crisis management can be composed.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This study proposes to deepen our current understanding of effective crisis management. The following research questions will be explored:

RQ1- what elements of the effective crisis management strategy were utilized by the United States Department of Defense following the terrorist bombing of the Pentagon?

RQ2- did the United States Department of Defense successfully utilize tactics or strategies that are not identified in the effective crisis management strategy?

METHOD

Definitions

Crisis management

Williams and Olaniran (1998) claimed that crisis management is "the use of public relations to minimize harm to the organization in emergency situations that could cause the organization irreparable damage" (p. 388). Crisis management is more than an action taken within an organization, but also "communication between the organization and its publics prior to, during, and after the negative occurrence" (Kauffman, 1999, p. 422). For the purpose of this research, these crisis management definitions will be combined: crisis management is the use of public relations to communicate between an organization and its publics prior to, during, and after a crisis situation in order to minimize possible harm or damage to the organization.

Crisis management strategy

As cited in the review of literature, Kauffman (1999) claimed "organizations facing a crisis should at least do the following: 1) respond quickly; 2) tell the truth; and 3) provide a constant flow of information, especially to key publics" (p. 422). Fines (1985) added the element of advanced planning and training: "1) set a broad strategy in advance; 2) respond quickly; 3) train spokespersons in advance; 4) seek third party support; and 5) centralize the spokesperson's function" (p. 53). Coombs (1999) generalized crisis response strategy into two key elements: compassion and information. He claimed, "crisis managers must provide crisis-related information to stakeholders and demonstrate compassion for victims" (p. 126).

The following list attempts to encompass the above strategies formulated from previous research in order to operationally define successful crisis management for the purpose of this study:

- a. quick, prompt response to crisis
- b. open and constant flow of information
- c. honest messages that are consistent in content
- d. display compassion
- e. centralize a trained spokesperson and designate his or her function.

Organization

The United States Department of Defense was selected for this research, because it is one of America's most recent examples of crisis management strategy at work. Crisis management and response has recently begun to be a major focus in the area of communication, and the action taken by the United States Department of Defense will help elaborate on the improved utilization of those strategies by organizations in America.

Procedures

This research is a qualitative study using a case study approach. The goal is to evaluate the action taken by the Department of Defense. This will be accomplished by contrasting the Department of Defense's response to the September 11 terrorist attacks with past crisis management failures of other organizations in an effort to define and further develop the elements of an effective crisis response strategy. According to an ongoing project by Colorado State University, a case study looks intensely at an individual or small participant pool, drawing conclusions only about that participant or group, and only in that specific context. It is an appropriate approach to use for this study, because the emphasis of this research was placed on exploration and description of the crisis management strategy utilized by the United States Department of Defense to gain a deeper understanding of the process.

Data Analysis

Data was collected from news transcripts of media events following the terrorist attacks. The actions taken by the Department of Defense were compared to the operational definition of effective crisis management strategy based on the research of Coombs (1999), Fines (1985), and Kauffman (1999). A thematic analysis will then be conducted on the data. According to Boyatzis (1998), the "descriptive use of thematic analysis is desirable if the particular methodology chosen for a study requires enhancing the clarity of results or findings and the ease of communication" (p. vii). "The use of thematic analysis involves three distinct stages: Stage I, deciding on sampling and design issues; Stage II, developing themes and a code; and Stage III, validating and using the code" (p. 29).

The sample for this research is the crisis management communications put out by the United States Department of Defense following the attack on America. The design is consistent with case studies and analyses from the previous research of Coombs (1999), Pious (2001), and Kauffman (1999). Themes are patterns "found in the information that at the minimum describes and organizes possible observations or at the maximum interprets aspects of the phenomenon" (Boyatzis, 1998, p. vii). Each code utilized in this research includes: a label, a definition of the theme, a description of how to identify the theme, qualifications and exclusions of the theme, and examples of the theme (see Appendix). This code was then used to analyze the sample to identify other crisis management strategies utilized by the United States Department of Defense that were not identified in previous research findings.

RESULTS

The following section is an analysis of each research question. The initial subsections describe how the Department of Defense adequately utilized effective crisis management strategies. The remaining subsections explore three new themes relating to the crisis response.

Quick, Prompt Response

Not only did the Department of Defense and the United States Government initially respond quickly to the crisis, but they consistently maintained a quick turnover of information throughout the ten days following the terrorist attacks. As the Commander in Chief, the President was the first to respond to the crisis, and did so several times throughout the course of the day on September 11. Due to the nature of the crisis, the defense of the nation was a clear priority over the provision of information. Nine hours following the attacks on September 11, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld assured the nation that various defensive maneuvers were already in place, such as “aircraft flying protective missions at various places in the United States.” He also verified that the military had “in fact declared Force Protection Condition Delta and a condition of high alert — indeed, the highest alert. We did so almost immediately upon the attacks.”

In addition to initial military response, information was also presented in a timely manner. By responding quickly, public relations practitioners, not media, fill “the information void created by a crisis with facts. Speculation and misinformation will fill the information void if an organization is silent or slow to respond” (Coombs, 1999, p. 126). This was essential in a terrorist crisis situation, because a lack of information could lead to nationwide panic. In the September 11th briefing at 6:42 p.m. EDT, Rumsfeld admitted that the department hadn’t received casualty figures yet, but added, “we’ll have information at some point in the future. And as quickly as it’s possible to have it, it will certainly be made available to each of you.”

Open and Constant Flow of Information

As stated in the review of literature, “openness means organizational members are available and willing to disclose information to the media and other stakeholders” (Coombs, 1999, p. 127). Between September 11 and September 21, the Department of Defense held 11 news briefings, 15 interviews, and 4 other media messages for a total of 30 organized media events. The media and public were also given opportunities to directly contact members of the Department of Defense via email, telephone, or website. Victims of the attacks were personally contacted on a daily basis to be given a briefing on the latest developments, even if there was no new information to provide.

However, the department also made a clear effort to intentionally restrict the disclosure of information, especially in the initial days following the attacks. As previously mentioned, Coombs (1999) found that an increase of “information specificity lead to stronger perceptions of personal control. This meant the more detailed information stakeholders received, the more they felt the organization could have prevented the crisis” (p. 137). The Department of Defense had to put forth an image of immediate recovery and renewed strength, yet it could not touch on intelligence matters that would have made American’s believe that the attacks could have been prevented.

The revelation of information increased significantly around September 14, two days following the attacks. Clearly, the Department of Defense held off on the provision of most information until they were confident the information was accurate. Even after information began to be released, spokespeople made it clear that the information was tentative. For example, Assistant Secretary of Defense Victoria Clarke noted on September 14 that she wanted “to emphasize, as I have been, a lot of these things we’re talking about – they are preliminary assessments, preliminary numbers, et cetera.” This exemplifies the department’s desire to be perceived as being an open source of the latest information, while simultaneously

protecting itself from possible inconsistent information in the future. Also, on September 15, a new briefing was held by various members of the Department of Defense which provided the public with 6-minutes of actual videotaped footage of the damage within the Pentagon.

Honest Messages, Consistent in Content

The terrorist attack was clearly a threat to national security. This left the Department of Defense in a unique situation that required informing the nation as well as protecting classified information. Likewise, little information was available in the hours immediately following the attack. The spokespeople for the Department of Defense utilized honesty to confront the initial absence of available information. In his first briefing on September 11, Rumsfeld stated, "I know the interest in casualty figures, and all I can say is it's not possible to have solid casualty figures at this time."

Yet, at times it was clear that the information wouldn't be supplied. In the first several briefings, Rumsfeld honestly responded to questions seeking classified information by replying, "we don't discuss intelligence matters," and "it's not the time for discussions like that." While this approach clearly contradicts crisis management theories to provide information, Rumsfeld was merely brutally honest.

Display Compassion

Each message sent to the media in the 10-day span following the attacks included some underlying effort to express compassion. In his first news briefing after the Pentagon bombing, Rumsfeld made several statements conveying his message of compassion. Rumsfeld opened the September 11 briefing by stating, "This is a tragic day for our country. Our hearts and prayers go to the injured, their families and friends." He also extended the condolences of the world by adding, "we've received calls from across the world offering their sympathy and indeed their assistance in various ways." On the following afternoon of September 12, Rumsfeld added "I do want to again express our sympathy to the families and friends and colleagues of all those who have been harmed by this attack on our country." General Shelton then personalized his sentiments as he extended his "condolences to the entire Department of Defense families, military and civilian, and to the families of all those throughout our nation who lost loved ones."

The crisis situation brought forth by the terrorist attack added a new dimension to crisis response in the sense that many of the organizational members were directly impacted by the tragedy. The majority of the victims in the Pentagon bombing were members of the Department of Defense, which enabled the department to send a message of both compassion and understanding. The Secretary of the Navy, Gordon R. England, pointed out just how personally the Navy itself was affected by the attack. In a press conference on the afternoon following the attacks, he stated, "some of the individuals that were on the aircraft are members of the Navy family. For example, one of our petty officers — his 11-year-old child was on the plane and headed to the West Coast." The direct emotional effect on the entire organization inspired the nation to reciprocate the sympathy extended to them by the Department of Defense. Furthermore, compassion "was related to perceptions of organizational control. A possible explanation is the compassion conditions inclusion of taking action, such as finding and paying for housing. The mere taking of action could be the reason compassion is linked to control" (Coombs, 1999, p. 135).

Centralized Spokesperson

Due to the nature of the Department of Defense organization, it was clearly challenging and ineffective to appoint a sole individual to correspond with the public. By bringing forth the leaders of each section within the department, a message of unity replaced the need for a centralized spokesperson. The organization needs to centralize spokespersons and designate their function to help ensure consistency in the communications reaching the public. The designated spokespeople should also have credibility and status in the public associated with the organization. Clearly Rumsfeld was at the forefront of the crisis response, behind only the President. He was often flanked by Naval, Army, and White House officials. Rumsfeld was the main spokesperson at well over half of the 30 media appearances. However, Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz, Secretary of the Army Thomas White, Assistant Secretary of Defense Victoria Clarke, Senator Carl Levin, and Rear Admiral Craig Quigley of the U.S. Navy served as representatives of each division within the Department of Defense.

New Themes

Responding to organizational crises initiated by terrorism is a relatively new and previously rare occurrence in the United States. Because the response needed was significantly different than product-oriented organizational crises, the analysis of data picked up on three new themes for reacting to crises. They include reassuring the public and presenting an image of unity, as well as commending ideal reactors to the crisis and seeking revenge.

Reassurance and Unity

Previous crisis management responses dealt with crises with a more definite timeline and cause than the subject of this research. There was a need for the Department of Defense to not only display compassion, but to also reassure the nation, as well as the world, that the United States of America would be protected and continue to stand behind its president. In the opening seconds of his first briefing on September 11, Rumsfeld noted that the department had “taken a series of measures to prevent further attacks and to determine who is responsible.” He also made it clear that the Pentagon, a symbol of American defense and militia, was “functioning in the face of this terrible act against our country...the briefing here is taking place in the Pentagon. The Pentagon’s functioning. It will be in business tomorrow.” Senator Carl Levin added, “our institutions are strong, and our unity is palpable.”

On September 12, Assistant Secretary of Defense Victoria Clarke furthered this message by stating, “our priorities this morning, today, are to care for the injured and the dead and their families, to work closely with the president and the national security team, and to ensure the safety of the American people and our men and women in uniform around the world.” She also stressed the enduring strength of the government by adding, “the Department of Defense is open for business. We’re here, we’re operating, and we’re functioning very well.” American’s needed to hear that the government they had previously viewed as invincible was going to be able to recover from the tremendous blow of the terrorist attacks.

The department of defense quickly identified the most prominent quality that unites America and separates it from “the enemy” – freedom. Statements consistently appeared throughout the ten days following the attacks recognizing the crisis as an attack that “strikes directly at what we, as a people, are. We’re free people” (Rumsfeld, September 17). Rumsfeld repeated this theme on September 18 during an interview when he claimed, “terrorism strikes at what we are. We are a free people. That’s what we as a people are. And terrorism tries to deny that freedom.” Rumsfeld extended his message of unity to the rest of the world on September 20 by pointing out “this is not a U.S. problem. There were 50, 60

nations who lost people, some of them hundreds of people, in the attacks that took place here on September 11th. That is why we're seeing such overwhelming support from across the globe."

Commending Ideal Reactors

The devastation of the terrorist attacks inspired many acts of heroism and patriotic behavior. The spokespersons for the Department of Defense quickly praised the American's who put their own personal needs aside to help the nation in a clear effort to recognize their ideal reaction to the crisis, and to promote further acts of selflessness and patriotism. Rumsfeld (September 11) praised the many volunteers by expressing his gratefulness "for the many volunteers from the defense establishment and from the excellent units from all throughout this region. They have our deep appreciation." Clarke furthered Rumsfeld's message on the morning on September 12 by saying how she was "truly impressed by the spirit of the people in this department and the way they have rallied round, both yesterday and this morning, coming back into this building." She also wanted "to give the department's thanks both to our own people and to the nation at large for the extraordinary, truly extraordinary response in donating blood. It's just terrific, and it shows how American's will pull together in a crisis."

Punishing the Crisis Initiator

The first five days following the attack contained messages consistent with previous researches' definition of ideal crisis management. However, in the next several days, the Department of Defense began to send out a clear message of revenge. This new theme was hinted at in the days immediately following the attack. For example, on September 11, Senator Carl Levin stated, "our determination to prevent more attacks is matched only by our unity to track down, root out, and relentlessly pursue terrorists, and states that support and harbor them." Senator John Warner then added, "step forward and let us hold accountable and punish those that have perpetrated this attack."

Later expressions of the desire to punish individuals who initiated the attack on the United States were communicated in messages of military and intelligence tactics. The Department of Defense identified a target for their revenge, and promised to seek out revenge until it was accomplished. During a September 16 interview, Rumsfeld spoke of using "the full weight of the United States government – political, diplomatic, financial, economic, military, and unconventional" to "smoke out" the terrorists. Later that day in another briefing, Rumsfeld added "that we have to take the battle, this war to the terrorists, where they are. And the best defense is an effective offense, in this case. And this means that they have to be rooted out." The desire for revenge is a rather natural human tendency, and the unique qualities of terrorist-related crises have introduced this new reaction to crisis in a very overt and pronounced manner.

DISCUSSION

By adding the three new themes to the description of the effective crisis management strategy utilized by the Department of Defense, individuals responding to crisis can take a more encompassing approach to the crises that involve terrorism. In order to respond quickly, organizations must have a crisis management response in place prior to the crisis describing roles for each individual involved in the response, such as the centralized spokesperson or person. If messages are not open, consistent, and honest, the organization sets itself further back than the initial crisis. This is an unfortunate result, as an effective response to crisis can enhance an organizations image, rather than tarnish it.

Furthermore, by displaying compassion for victims and commending ideal reactors, the organization humanizes itself rather than enhancing a “bad guy” image. Compassion shows understanding and sympathy, and in itself requires the organization to take action. This reassurance is invaluable in a terrorist situation. American’s look to their government for strength and support. As a nation, we cannot afford to ineffectively manage crisis situations involving national security. It is our government that enhances our unity, and if the government as an organization fails to maintain the trust of its stakeholders through effective crisis response, all national security and well-being may be lost.

The results of this case study may be affected by this research’s generalized definition of effective crisis management. Research in this area is relatively limited, and crises vary too much to create an entirely universal definition. Results cannot be applied to general theory, but instead help us to better understand this new, real-world instance of crisis management in response to terrorism. This research also focuses on initial reaction to the crisis situation, and actions may change according to the long-term efforts of the Department of Defense. According to Colorado State University Writing Center, because case studies rely on personal interpretation of data and inferences, “results may not be generalizable, are difficult to test for validity, and rarely offer a problem-solving prescription. Relying on one or a few subjects as a basis for cognitive extrapolations runs the risk of inferring too much from what might be circumstance.” Lastly, due to the high volume of victims and the difficulty of researchers to contact them, this study lacks personal interviews from actual victims. Future research should be conducted to further analyze individual accounts of perceived success in the Department of Defense’s crisis management.

CONCLUSION

By conducting this qualitative case analysis on the Department of Defense’s crisis management response following the terrorist attack on America, one gains a deeper understanding of crisis response and communication research. Most of the results correspond with existing research as described by my review of literature. However, due to the nature of the crisis, it became clear that there is a void in previous research in the area of crisis management involving terrorist situations.

Previous studies focused mainly on responding to crises related to products or specific independent organizations. Clearly, the United States Government has a stakeholder audience encompassing the nation as a whole, and cannot solve the problem in the same way as, for example, Johnson & Johnson in their approach to responding to the product tampering in their factories. Responding to terrorism in our homeland is a relatively new phenomenon for our government. While previous crisis responses by NASA and other governmental agencies are largely viewed as unsuccessful, the Department of Defense excelled without having the advantage of previous experience in responding to crises of this nature.

Additional research is needed in defining an appropriate strategy to responding to crises such as the terrorist attack on America. Rhetorical researchers like Timothy Sellnow have introduced a concept of social responsibility and legitimacy that could play a significant role in crisis response in terrorist situations. The social legitimacy perspective focuses on rebuilding public trust in the longer run, while this research values a successful, prompt response to crisis. The terrorist situation brought forth by September 11 requires patience and long-term rebuilding. Future research should aim to consolidate both the public relations and rhetorical approaches to responding to crisis situations in order to more effectively prescribe a long-term, socially responsible recovery from crises.

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APPENDIX

Sample Code Cards

1. Code "A"
2. Quick, prompt response to crisis
3. This theme is evidenced in the dates and times of the initial communication put out by the Department of Defense in response to the terrorist crisis
4. Includes dates and time of day. Also includes elapsed time between the incident and the first public communication by the Department of Defense in response to the crisis, or turnover time between discovery of new information and its release to the general public. Does not include frequency, truthfulness, or length of response.
5. Example: The first Department of Defense briefing occurred on September 11, 2002 at 6:42 p.m. EDT.

1. Code "B"
2. Open and constant flow of information
3. This theme occurs when information is continually flowing out of the Department of Defense. Spokespeople make themselves available to the public and media.
4. Includes frequency of briefings and the organizations openness to disclosing information to the public and media. Also includes the quantity and length of information supplied. Does not include truthfulness, quality, or validity of information.
5. Example: The Department of Defense held 30 media events in the first ten days following the terrorist attacks.

1. Code "C"
2. Honest messages which are consistent in content
3. Code "C" is portrayed when the communications of the Department of Defense are truthful, factual, and valid.
4. Includes verbal, nonverbal, and written messages. Can include the spokesperson admitting they don't know something as long as that proves valid. Also includes intentional ambiguity to mislead the recipients of the message. Does not include amount of information provided.
5. Example: Rumsfeld (September 11)- "I know the interest in casualty figures, and all I can say is it's not possible to have solid casualty figures at this time." Here the spokesperson truthfully admits a lack of information.

1. Code "D"
2. Display compassion
3. This theme is clearly shown when the organization handling the crisis is empathetic to the affect the crisis has on its stakeholders and public.
4. Includes displays of sympathy, apology, understanding, support, etc. May include monetary support of victims, or efforts made to correct the situation.
5. Example: Rumsfeld (September 11)- "This is a tragic day for our country. Our hearts and prayers go to the injured, their families and friends."

1. Code "E"
2. Centralized spokesperson
3. Code "E" is displayed when the same individual(s) publicly respond to the crisis
4. Includes a consistent media and public contact for the provision of information in regards to the crisis. Doesn't include multiple spokespeople.
4. Example: Secretary of Defense Donald H. Rumsfeld hosted 14 of 30 media events following the terrorist attack on the Pentagon.