

Role-Playing a Public Relations Crisis: Preparing Business Students for Career Challenges

Stephen L. Baglione

ABSTRACT. Crisis management affects all institutions. Organizations now operate in a media-saturated world where individuals can disseminate information instantaneously across the globe via the internet. As a result, ensuring future business leaders have an understanding of how crises develop and what alternatives exist is a valuable educational outcome. Through a role-playing exercise, students undertake crisis management for a fictitious organization. The exercise, according to participants, provides a realistic environment where higher level learning (as compared with merely listening to lectures) resulted. Role-playing also improved student awareness of the components of good crisis management and prepared them to handle a crisis. *[Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-HAWORTH. E-mail address:*

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INTRODUCTION

Crisis management has taken center stage in the business community, from the verbal jousting between Ford and Firestone over the Explorer tragedies to the last ditch effort by former public accounting firm Arthur Andersen to survive (or any organization embroiled in the accounting scandals that have plagued this young century), or GE's former CEO Jack Welch's acrimonious divorce, besmirching probably the generation's most successful CEO (Sloan and Hosenball, 2002; Murray et al., 2002; Gomes-Casseres, 2001).

But crises are certainly not limited to business. Hurricane Katrina in 2005 proved that. And anyone who listened to Tommy Thompson's (former U.S. Secretary of Health and Human Services) inaccurate remarks after the anthrax attacks in 2001 can appreciate the need for good crisis management (Gilbert and Marchione, 2001). More evidence is found in the poignant end of the Russian submarine Kursk (Barany, 2004), where authorities refused for four days to publicly acknowledge the tragedy or seek outside help. The Russians learned from their mistakes and sought foreign assistance immediately during the next crisis which was instrumental in saving all seamen on the AS-28 mini sub (Isachenkov, 2005). On a lighter note, the "wardrobe malfunction" during Janet Jackson's Super Bowl performance created an imbroglio among participants not wanting to take blame, and was endlessly relived on the internet and TiVo (Wenner, 2004). Conversely, the poise and dignity of New York City Mayor Rudy Giuliani after September 11th exemplified crisis management. Giuliani's performance has translated into millions of dollars in consulting fees and services, while partners in Arthur Andersen lost everything, and 118 died on the Kursk.

In a media-saturated world, where information can be blogged immediately on the Internet and disseminated worldwide, institutions must prepare to react quickly and correctly to a crisis. With terrorists capable of striking anywhere in the world, all organizations from the public transportation system to the retail store in the mall are at risk and must prepare for the devastation and fear wrought by terrorists.

Yet, how much do students as future leaders appreciate or understand crisis management, and are they prepared to deal with it? Business schools have been criticized for poorly preparing graduates for real-world careers (McDaniel and White, 1993; Porter and McKibbin, 1988; Cheit, 1985; McDaniel and Hise, 1984). Specifically, many graduates have unrealistic expectations about careers and lack the requisite skills to succeed such as: work ethic, oral communication skills, and creativity (McDaniel and White, 1993; Shipp et al., 1993).

PURPOSE AND GOALS

Classrooms can closely replicate the real world through active learning, especially role-playing to address these deficiencies. In terms of crisis management, the nuances can only be explored through "doing." Dealing with stakeholders, especially the media, can be daunting and fraught with potential minefields. So the purpose of this article is to explain how faculty can better prepare students for handling a public relations crisis. The author recommends using a case study role-playing technique designed to facilitate learning and boost understanding in a more realistic environment. In effect, case role-playing forces students to be creative. The specific goals of the active learning technique described in this article are to have students:

1. understand the importance and keys to crisis management;
2. increase their learning of crisis management;
3. be better prepared to handle a future crisis; and
4. recognize the merit in the components of the active learning exercise and the professor's participation in the exercise.

These are converted into four testable objectives as discussed in the assessment section below.

ACTIVE LEARNING AND ROLE-PLAYING

Active learning's foundation lies in active participation by students (Bonwell and Eison, 1991). Role-playing, in-class written assignments, service-learning, and student-generated questions are all active learning techniques (Gujarathi and McQuade, 2002; Alden, 1999; Wynd, 1989). In general, active learning "engenders greater understanding and memory

retention than non-participatory techniques because it requires interpretations through analysis, synthesis, and evaluation, in sum, a higher-order-learning" (Bonwell and Eison, 1991, p. iii). Role-playing specifically can overcome many of the deficiencies in preparing graduates for real-world careers (Lamb and Baker, 1993). Its applications are endless.

"Role-playing can be used to help students experience stressful, unfamiliar, complex, or controversial situations by creating circumstances that are momentarily real, thereby letting students develop and practice those skills necessary for coping" (Bonwell and Eison, 1991, p. 47). Also, when role-playing in groups, students can learn from one another. Fellow students are a more credible source for many students than the professor. Members who understand the role-playing exercise must articulate that understanding to those who do not in order for the group to succeed. Thus, it can simulate many real-world experiences that students may confront in their careers; experiences that require adaptability, since in most cases, each role-playing exercise is unique, contingent on participants' prior decisions. But, ultimately, participants must arrive at a solution. Doing so forces them to examine alternatives and consequences (Milroy, 1982; Bonwell and Eison, 1991). Learning occurs throughout. And through even poor application, the student gains insights; and failure, many times, provides greater learning than success if the student must evaluate his or her own performance. Yet, role-playing is underutilized in the classroom (Cannon and Newble, 2000). When tested, however, its limited use has generated some exemplary classroom results (Seltzer and Smither, 1995). For example, "Students report higher levels of engagement and learning at institutions where faculty members use active and collaborative learning techniques" (Umbach and Wawrzynski, 2005, p. 153), and they have been shown to increase test scores (Yoder and Hochevar, 2005).

Role-playing involves three stages: instructions, simulation, and debriefing. During the instructions, the professor explains the simulation, delineates roles, provides information, states objectives, and encourages students to be creative, experimental, and respectful. The professor must also reiterate that knowledge gained is applicable beyond the classroom (Dennehy et al., 1998; Sutherland and Bonwell, 1996). But the professor's responsibility is that of facilitator; it is self-defeating for him or her to take over the role for a student although the professor may assume another role, for example, a buyer in a negotiation, or help students through difficult or stressful parts (Milroy, 1982). Any points missed by the participants can be explained in the final stage, when debriefing.

With the role-playing complete, the class begins deconstructing it, deciphering what worked from what did not, and why. Collectively, the class can arrive at conclusions only explored briefly in the lecture. The focus should be on decisions taken, decision consequences, and options not explored (Milroy, 1982).

Active learning is not a panacea. It requires the professor to relinquish some control over the class, and it allows discussions into unanticipated but important areas (Bonwell and Eison, 1991). Relinquishing control, however, does not mean abandoning structure; otherwise the simulation becomes disorienting and chaotic for students (Dennehy et al., 1998; Sutherland and Bonwell, 1996).

A major criticism of role-playing is that it leaves inadequate time for lecturing, although experiential learning (active learning techniques like role-playing) has been shown to be more effective than lecturing (Specht, 1985). Lecturing is excellent in presenting information quantity, showing a professor's enthusiasm, maintaining classroom control, tailoring a message to a situation or group, and appealing to orator learners. Yet, lectures have inherent weaknesses: failure to provide feedback, students' attention may wane given only one teaching format, assuming that learning occurs for all students at the same rate, and it is not good for complex, abstract material or for higher-order learning (Sutherland and Bonwell, 1996). As discussed earlier, active learning can address these limitations, and, most important, it reaches students who learn through processes other than passive listening (Bruni, 2000). The result: Less time is necessary for lecturing. And the time used for role-playing goes quickly with the students active and busy (Harrin, 1998).

APPLICABILITY OF ACTIVE LEARNING TECHNIQUE TO CRISIS MANAGEMENT

The technique proposed here is appropriate for both graduate and undergraduate classes and on an undergraduate level for introductory and advanced classes. I have employed it in an introductory graduate marketing class and, using a slightly different scenario, in an international marketing class. In larger classes, the technique can be adapted by randomly calling on groups to participate, although the duration of the telephone conversation should allow all groups to participate.

Crisis management ultimately is about maintaining brand equity, restoring consumer confidence in the brand. A rudimentary understanding of the importance of branding and brand equity and promotion is needed before

students undertake this exercise. Students, having witnessed countless press conferences, including those unfolding in the wake of hurricane Katrina, can tap those experiences in creating a press conference.

The technique requires two 50-minute classes. In the first class, students are handed an adaptation of a *Harvard Business Review* case, a mere 425 words (Sonnenfeld, 1994). They are told to read it (see Appendix A). After going over the material, students are instructed to get into groups of two to three and to prepare to talk to a reporter (detailed in the case), waiting impatiently on hold, who is seeking the company's response about the crisis. They are given five minutes. I also detail general rules for the exercise. The crisis is that a company (role-played by students) donates to a charity, an umbrella organization for a myriad of causes, which gave money to a radical pro-life organization that bombed an abortion clinic. When asked the previous day for a response, the company's regional public relations spokesperson issued a no-comment and did not inform the corporate office of the bombing; hence, the role-player arrives at work, and is blind-sided by the reporter. Although the role-playing exercise is listed on the syllabus, students are unaware of its content. The scenario is temporarily real and stressful. No real company's future is at stake, but the students are placed into a situation where peer pressure is great.

Two participatory exercises exist: the telephone conversation and a press conference. With groups of three students, everyone participates since the press conference can be conducted by one or two members. This exercise forces participation; however, it is collaborative participation. Even during the telephone conversation, group members attempt to "feed" their other member(s) information. Before the conversation, the dialogue and debate are insightful on how students strategize their response. During their discussion, I wander the classroom asking questions and eavesdropping.

I bring a telephone to class to enhance realism (which the students use). I also bring a mirror so they can see their facial expressions while talking. Each group chooses a representative to speak with the reporter (me). After years of practice, I have developed a series of questions to pose. For example, if they say, "What can I help you with?" I ask, "Does your company give money to blow up buildings every day?" If no comment is given, I ask, "What are you hiding? I will find out."

This stage of the role-playing exercise ends with my synopsis: do not base your company's future on a few minutes of preparation. However, you must speak to the media. To ensure equality in answering the media and minimize the time to contact all important stakeholders, a press

conference is necessary, allowing adequate preparation. This concludes the first class. Homework for the next class, which is graded, is to write a scripted press conference. As with the telephone conversation, each group must present, and the presenter must be different from the person who spoke on the telephone. Presentation order is the reverse of the telephone conversation.

Again, I, role-playing the press, have questions prepared to ask each group. "Does your organization assume any culpability for the bombing? Will you rebuild the abortion clinic? Is your company pro-life or pro-choice?" Because I have conducted this exercise more than a dozen times, I have enough questions to ask each group at least two unique questions. Once these enlightening press conferences are done, I review. "Feedback and assessment is of particular importance to experiential learning so the connection between the experience and the course content is monitored, and opportunity for correction is allowed prior to the end of the activity" (Young, 2002, p. 45).

Students are asked what information should be gathered before the press conference. I supplement their responses. We discuss what the company should have done before the press conference, what information it should have gathered, and with whom it should have spoken. We also discuss seeking legal counsel, prioritizing stakeholders, and brainstorming about potential questions you may be asked during the press conference. Many students do not even consider that the umbrella charity may issue its own statement, one that may contradict that of the role-playing company.

I then conduct my own press conference where I role-play the company the students have been role-playing. Now the students role-play the press, asking me questions. During my press conference, I discuss how to present (e.g., body language, attire, font size to be used while reading from my notes, numbering pages for the notes), and what constitutes a good press conference by highlighting points in my presentation. We contrast my presentation with theirs (e.g., stressing the positive about the organization, eliciting the help of others in the community, avoiding divisive issues, providing time to think before answering a question, admitting your mistake, and rectifying the current crisis), and discuss the general response to any crisis.

Our focus now shifts on how to prevent being ill-prepared for a crisis. We discuss: creating a mechanism and group responsible within the organization to better prepare for a future crisis; developing an early warning system to monitor potential problems; creating a policy statement to disseminate to employees; simulating future crises; ensuring

communication systems can accommodate a large influx of calls; and developing a website that would be activated during a crisis (Mittroff, 2005; Davies, 2005; Robinson, 2005; Koster and Politis-Norton, 2004; Boin et al., 2004; Gaudet, 2002; Cohn, 2000). My review ends with current examples of good and bad crisis management by organizations.

ASSESSMENT

Students have presented anecdotal evidence that the exercise achieved its results: comments after class, homework assignments, body language. But it was not until I conducted a survey that its merits were substantiated. A pilot study of one class revealed very positive feedback (Baglione, 2003). This encouraged me to collect more data.

Prior to undertaking the role-playing exercise, students complete an 8-item survey on the import and components of successful crisis management. Immediately after completing the exercise, students complete a longer survey including the original 8-items and an additional 11 questions on the efficacy of the exercise. (Note: Any student not completing both surveys was dropped from the analysis, and those completing both recorded the same identifier, unknown to the researcher, on both surveys. Students are told that their survey responses will not be examined until after the semester ends.) The first eight questions are tested in a repeated sample *t*-test, while the remaining questions are tested against the scale's midpoint of four (one-to-seven scale anchored by strongly agree and strongly disagree). Seventy-five students in five classes completed both surveys.

Examining the pre-exercise questions, students understand the importance of, impact of, and need to prepare for a crisis. They recognize that effective crisis management can save a brand's reputation [$t(74) = 7.18$, $p < .000$] and successful companies are good at crisis management [$t(74) = 3.14$, $p < .003$], while poor crisis management can ruin a company financially [$t(74) = 2.58$, $p < .013$]. They recognize that preparation [$t(74) = 6.77$, $p < .000$] and truthfulness are key to crisis management [$t(74) = 4.36$, $p < .000$], and that consumers do not forget quickly about a company's reaction to a crisis [$t(74) = -2.13$, $p < .04$] (Table 1). Although respondents recognized the need for a quick response during a crisis, and that its affect is not short-term, the post results, after the exercise, did not differ statistically from the pre-responses. Overall, the first objective is achieved.

Respondents believe the exercise increased learning [$t(74) = 17.2$, $p < .000$, $M = 1.68$], and, more importantly, that it provided a higher level of learning than merely lecturing [$t(74) = 15.05$, $p < .000$, $M = 2.07$]. Thus, the second objective is supported. Role-playing, according to respondents, improved their crisis management skills [$t(74) = 18.92$, $p < .000$, $M = 2$] and confidence [$t(74) = 17.98$, $p < .000$, $M = 2.16$], preparation [$t(74) = 21.43$, $p < .000$, $M = 2.01$], and creativity [$t(74) = 19.43$, $p < .000$, $M = 2.34$] in handling a crisis. They also recognize the importance of releasing information quickly [$t(74) = 16.39$, $p < .000$, $M = 1.72$]. Objective three is supported. Finally, the exercise, according to respondents, made the class more realistic [$t(74) = 18.99$, $p < .000$, $M = 1.89$] and the two components, telephone conversation and press conference, built upon one another [$t(74) = 15.23$, $p < .000$, $M = 2.08$]. They also believed that the professor's review was informative [$t(74) = 16.92$, $p < .000$, $M = 1.89$] and participation improved learning [$t(74) = 18.8$, $p < .000$, $M = 1.62$] (Table 2). Objective four is supported.

TABLE 1. Student Evaluations (Pre- and Post-Evaluation Means and Standard Deviations and Repeated Sample *t*-Test and *p*-Value)

	Pre (mean)	Post (mean)	t-value
1. Preparation is the key to crisis management.	2.51 (1.20) ¹	1.47 (.78) ¹	6.77 (.000) ²
2. Effective crisis management can save a brand's reputation.	2.52 (1.14)	1.45 (.70)	7.18 (.000) ²
3. Successful crisis management requires a quick response.	2.87 (1.45)	2.63 (1.73)	1.22 (.227)
4. During a crisis, companies should be truthful.	2.40 (1.25)	1.79 (.98)	4.36 (.000) ²
5. Consumers forget quickly about a company's reaction to a crisis.	4.72 (1.49)	5.17 (1.53)	-2.13 (.036) ³
6. Successful companies are good at crisis management.	2.40 (1.25)	1.89 (.99)	3.14 (.002) ³
7. Poor crisis management may ruin a company financially.	2.60 (1.59)	2.01 (1.29)	2.58 (.012) ³
8. A crisis affect on a company is only short-term.	5.04 (1.32)	5.23 (1.31)	-.89 (.376)

¹Scale: 1 Strongly Agree to 7 Strongly Disagree

²Statistically significant at the .000 level (one tailed *t*-test with 74 degrees of freedom)

³Statistically significant at the .05 level (one tailed *t*-test with 74 degrees of freedom)

TABLE 2. Student Evaluations (Mean, t-Value, and p-Value)

9. Role-playing the crisis management exercise increased learning.		
Mean	t-value	
1.68 ¹	17.20 (.000) ²	
10. Role-playing the crisis management exercise improved my understanding the importance of time management in releasing information during a crisis.		
1.72	16.39 (.000) ²	
11. Role-playing the crisis management exercise made the class more realistic.		
1.89	18.99 (.000) ²	
12. The professor's review of the role-playing crisis management exercise was informative.		
1.65	16.92 (.000) ²	
13. Role-playing the crisis management exercise provided a higher level of learning than the professor's lectures.		
2.07	15.05 (.000) ²	
14. Role-playing improved my crisis management skills.		
2.00	18.92 (.000) ²	
15. Role-playing improved my confidence to handle a public relations crisis.		
2.16	17.98 (.000) ²	
16. Role-playing better prepared me to handle a public relations crisis.		
2.01	21.43 (.000) ²	
17. Role-playing the crisis management exercise enabled me to be creative.		
2.34	19.43 (.000) ²	
18. The two stages (i.e., telephone conversation and press conference) built upon one another.		
2.08	15.23 (.000) ²	
19. Having the professor participate in the role-playing exercise improved learning.		
1.62	18.80 (.000) ²	

¹Scale: 1 Strongly Agree to 7 Strongly Disagree²Statistically significant at the .000 level (one tailed t-test with 74 degrees of freedom)³Statistically significant at the .05 level (one tailed t-test with 74 degrees of freedom)

CONCLUSIONS

Crisis management affects all organizations, and, in our media-saturated world, it is crucial to react quickly and correctly. Students believe they are better prepared and confident in their ability to handle a crisis after completing this exercise. This exercise enhances student knowledge about preparing for, participating in, and managing a crisis. It does this by forcing students to simulate a crisis in an environment they deem realistic. It provides a sequential approach for dealing with the crisis.

This is accomplished in an environment that forces collaborative learning and participation. By assuming the role of a company in crisis, students must ensure that the brand survives. Once that is accomplished, they must create a mechanism and staff to prepare for future crises.

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APPENDIX A

Case Adaptation of Sandi Sonnenfeld (1994) "Media Policy—What Media Policy?"

As she approached the building that morning, S.L. Konzet's thoughts focused on the weekend, with only Friday standing in the way. For the first time in the seven years since she started NaturaleEZ Inc., a leading clothing manufacturer based in Chicago, her weekends were work-free. Entering the office, she was met by a frantic George Seaver, a regional vice president. "We've got a problem," he said in an excited voice. "It has to do with the company's corporate giving fund." Since NaturaleEZ had gone public five years ago, the company had donated over \$800,000 to charity (15% of net income). This, more than anything, fostered an image of the company as a caring corporation. The charity donation program had always been administered by corporate headquarters, and the recipients had always been major national or worldwide relief organizations. To spur involvement by all employees in the effort, this year Ms. Konzet after talks with her senior managers agreed to be more flexible. The changes meant that the heads of each regional division are now able to determine where the donations go.

S.L. motioned George and the other regional vice presidents into her private conference room.

"Okay, tell me."

In the next five minutes, S.L. knew the weekend would have to wait. The situation: One of the regional divisions provided money for ILCCARE, which supports 140 social service organizations in the Midwest, including Baby3Rights, a radically pro-life group. Representatives of Baby3Rights claimed responsibility for the bombing of an abortion clinic. Although no-one was hurt, at least from initial accounts, a local TV news report indicated NaturaleEZ Inc. supported the bombing tactics because of their unrestricted contributions via ILCCARE to Baby3Rights. The station received a "no comment" statement from NaturaleEZ's Midwest public relations person, Gilbert Hodges, late yesterday afternoon. When George concluded, Jean Travail, the Midwest regional vice president, spoke, "You can lay the blame on me. I'll tell the media I'm responsible for the donation decision—senior company officials had no prior knowledge. Anyway, it's the partial truth."

"No. That's not a reasonable solution," S.L. said. "It wouldn't solve anything. Even if Jean resigned, rumors would circulate that we put pressure on her to do so. That could make things worse."

While still discussing the issue, Konzet's aide interrupted. "I apologize, S.L., but Frederick Hampton of the *Chicago Sun-Times* is on the phone. I told him you were in a meeting, but he said he'll hold until you are free. What do you want me to say to him?"

What would you tell Hampton? He is waiting!

APPENDIX B

Components of Active Learning Technique

Instructions

1. Read case
2. Professor's instructions

Simulation

3. Students in groups create a reply to the reporter (five minutes)
4. Students role-play telephone conversation with reporter (telephone and mirror used as props)
- Faculty member role-plays the reporter
5. Faculty member's wrap-up for telephone conversation
6. Students develop press conference (homework)

Debriefing

7. Students role-play a press conference
- Faculty member role-plays the reporter
8. Synopsis of role-playing technique
- Students brainstorm on information to be gathered before press conference
- Faculty member supplements list
- Faculty member's press conference
- Faculty member discusses important components of the press conference
- Students role-play the press
- Faculty member discusses an organization's general response during any crisis
- Faculty member discusses preparing for or preventing the next crisis
- Faculty member provides examples of good and bad crisis management