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The Effectiveness of Communication Skills among Public Relations Officers in Crisis Management

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Abstract:

Public relations are a critical driving force within any organization, acting as the key link that promotes cohesiveness between the institution and its stakeholders while also promoting trust and a positive image. This study seeks to shed light on the individual allocated to this administrative job, which is considered as the backbone that must be prioritized in order to ensure organizational continuity and protect its image and reputation, both internally and internationally. The study aims to identify the most important communication skills required of public relations officers, given their critical role in addressing crises that firms from all industries may face. Such crises necessitate a well-thought-out and intentional reaction through preventive and corrective tactics because they frequently result in confusion and long-lasting effects. These strategies are the responsibility of the public relations officer as part of crisis management, which is an effort to guide the business through adversity and mitigate the bad consequences that may arise.

Keywords: public relations, communication skills, crisis management, leadership, organizational communication

Introduction:

Crisis management is an essential part of the overall strategic plan of any organization. Every institution, regardless of its size or field of activity, is vulnerable to crises. Within such circumstances, the public relations department plays a vital role in guiding and controlling human behavior in times of crisis. The existence and success of this department depend largely on how strongly senior management believes in the value of this function and the extent to which it provides the appropriate conditions for its effective practice by all employees on one hand, and by a specialized unit or a dedicated department on the other.

The position of the public relations department within an organization reflects the institution's level of interest in communication and the degree of resources and support made available to it. As a result, in many organizations that recognize the importance of public relations, the person responsible for this function holds a senior administrative position that is

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sometimes equivalent to a vice president or an executive director. This responsibility gives that person the authority to direct subordinate departments and to integrate public relations principles across all organizational activities.

Public relations officers often participate directly in high level decision making. This participation allows them to apply professional principles that align with both the interests of the organization and those of its audiences. Through this work they help to formulate policies that promote trust, strengthen institutional reputation, and enhance credibility.

Crisis management is one of the most critical obligations entrusted to public relations officers. Crisis management necessitates advanced talents that include technical proficiency, analytical aptitude, strategic communication, and emotional stability. The success of these competences has a direct impact on an organization's ability to overcome challenges, rebalance, and maintain stability.

For this reason, the present study seeks to answer the following central research question:

"What are the essential communication skills that public relations officers must possess in order to manage organizational crises effectively?"

1. Definition of Concepts

1.1 Definition of the Institution

An institution is, first and foremost, a multifaceted and dynamic reality. It appears in various and changing forms that can be understood through several criteria related particularly to its field of activity, size, legal status, and age. More generally, it can also be analyzed through its strategic, competitive, and organizational position. As a living entity, the institution passes through different stages of a life cycle, including the phases of establishment, initiation, expansion, development, and maturity. These stages depend mainly on the nature of the work or the type of activity it performs (Cyrille Mandou, *Comptabilité générale de l'entreprise Instruments et procédures*, 2003, p.14).

Another definition describes an institution as any financially independent organizational structure that operates within a legal and social framework. Its purpose is to integrate all factors of production in order to achieve the greatest possible output, or to exchange goods or services of various types. As an organization, the institution functions both as a tangible social structure and as an active economic entity that follows a coherent and

integrated system (Sayed, *Reinventing Institutions to Achieve Excellence*, 2019, p.10).

1.2 The Public Relations Officer and His or Her Authority within the Institution

1.2.1 Definition of the Public Relations Officer

The public relations officer is the person who performs the role of an analyst responsible for examining people's impressions and behaviors and communicating them to the organization. This individual interprets public attitudes, opinions, and likely reactions toward the institution. The officer maintains a positive relationship between the organization and its public, seeks to enhance the institution's image, and acquires knowledge about communication, industrial and political relations. Public relations is therefore considered a practical art aimed at gaining the confidence and approval of the public. The methods and tools of public relations have been refined and improved through university programs and specialized training institutes.

In any conference, whether local, regional, or international, public relations officers must pay special attention to internal and external news coverage of the event. This requirement means they should maintain good relations with media outlets, particularly satellite channels, news agencies, radio, and television networks, because these are the means that convey the image of the organization to the public (Bassem, *Dictionary of Public Relations Terms*, 2014, pp.180–181).

1.2.2 Authority and Responsibilities of the Public Relations Officer

A key question often raised by researchers and practitioners is: How do public relations operate, and what functions do they perform within institutions, the public sphere, and society at large? The answer lies in the wide range of activities that allow an organization to achieve its objectives through the authority granted to the public relations officer.

In the past, the role of public relations was limited to facilitative, routine, and ceremonial functions such as organizing administrative events, conferences, and meetings, or performing social activities within the institution. In contrast, the contemporary concept of public relations assigns it an active and decisive function. The authority of the public relations officer now extends into senior management and decision making, where decisions are studied and analyzed using modern scientific techniques.

Today, public relations also encompass research, studies, strategic planning, public opinion evaluation, and analysis of the audiences with

whom the institution interacts (Ahmad, *Public Relations: Concepts and Performance*, 2005, p.40).

1.2.3 Characteristics of the Public Relations Officer

Because the main tasks of the public relations department are assigned to the individual responsible for this activity, that person must possess the preparation, expertise, and knowledge necessary to carry out these duties at the highest professional standards. These attributes are essential to understanding public opinion and its evolution.

Although there is no such thing as a perfect public relations specialist, because no human being can embody all ideal traits, certain characteristics and criteria can guide the selection of an effective officer (Mohammad, *Public Relations in the Field of Sports*, 2016, p.39).

Personal traits

Personal traits represent the external and internal qualities expected of a public relations officer, including physiological and psychological characteristics such as physical fitness and mental stability. It would not be reasonable for a person who suffers from psychological disturbances to hold this position, as such issues would inevitably affect interpersonal interactions (Mamdouh, *Public Relations and the Art of Practice*, 2004, p.22).

In addition, overall appearance, pleasant facial expressions, polite speech, and appropriate dress are all important aspects of professional presentation. The officer should be able to express ideas clearly and effectively, possess an engaging personality, and be capable of building positive impressions among colleagues and the public. Stability, composure, and emotional balance are also critical traits (Lebanon, *Public Relations: Principles and Scientific Foundations*, 2002, p.163).

Other key characteristics required for a successful public relations officer include (Mohammad, *Public Relations: Science, Art, and Practice*, 2020, pp.51–52):

- The ability to interact effectively with people.
- Self-control and cooperation.
- Courage and a sense of responsibility.
- Creativity and innovation.
- Skill in clear and precise writing and logical thinking.
- Comprehensive knowledge of journalism, broadcasting, and other forms of media.
- Familiarity with printing, design, and visual communication.

- The ability to build strong relationships with supervisors and leaders.
- Honesty and accuracy in conveying information.
- Fairness in dealing with all groups of the public.
- Integrity in personal and professional conduct.

2. The Crisis and Crisis Management

2.1 The Concept of Crisis

A crisis is a critical point that many institutions face. Its impact differs depending on its intensity and the extent of preparedness to confront it. The recurrence and diversity of crises in recent years have made the term both common and essential in the field of organizational studies. It is therefore necessary to examine not only what a crisis is but also how it can be managed.

According to *Webster's Dictionary*, a crisis is a critical period or an unstable condition that awaits a decisive change. It may also refer to a turning point or a sudden situation that creates instability and leads to undesirable outcomes in a short period of time. Confronting a crisis requires a specific decision made at a moment when the relevant parties are often unprepared or unable to respond effectively (Jamal al-Din, *Crisis and Disaster Management: An Inevitable Necessity*, 1998, p.4).

A crisis can also be understood as a critical point that disrupts the social system, causing partial or total paralysis of vital community functions. It may produce both material and moral damage. The rapid sequence of events that accompanies a crisis activates elements of instability within the system and compels decision makers to intervene quickly to restore balance and stability (Ali Falah, *Media and Crisis Management*, 2015, p.20).

2.2 The Concept and Stages of Crisis Management

There is no doubt that crisis management represents a set of coordinated environmental interactions among numerous internal and external factors. Effective management requires cooperation and integration at all stages of the crisis, using a collection of communication strategies designed to manage the situation successfully.

2.2.1 Definition of Crisis Management

Crisis management is the art of control that seeks to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the decision-making system at both the group and individual levels. Its purpose is to overcome bureaucratic barriers that hinder rapid response and to guide the organization out of a state of confusion and instability (Abd al-Razzaq, *Media and Crisis Management*, 2019, p.116).

Crisis management can be defined as the process through which an organization deals with a major event that threatens its stability, operations, and key publics. It is considered one of the most important functions within the field of public relations (Hanan Ahmad, *The Use of Public Relations in Crisis Management*, 2012, p.61).

Another definition describes crisis management as the process of handling crises to avoid their occurrence through careful planning for predictable situations and making the necessary preparations for those that can be anticipated. It functions within a structured system designed to control results or minimize destructive effects when emergencies occur.

According to a further definition, crisis management is a specialized administrative process that provides a strategic response to crisis situations. It involves a group of preselected and specially trained managers who use their expertise and specific procedures to reduce potential losses to the lowest possible level (Majid Abd al-Mahdi, *Crisis Management: Approaches, Concepts, and Processes*, 2012, p.38).

2.2.2 Stages of Crisis Management

Most crises pass through five fundamental stages. If the decision maker fails to manage any one of these stages properly, that failure may lead to the occurrence or escalation of the crisis.

1. ***Detection of early warning signals***

Before it occurs, a crisis often sends out a series of warning signs or symptoms that indicate the likelihood of an impending problem. If these signals are ignored, the crisis is likely to develop. It is often difficult to distinguish between different types of early warnings. For example, graffiti or messages written on walls may reflect employee dissatisfaction, or they may have no such meaning at all. Likewise, a sudden increase in machine malfunctions may signal internal sabotage or simply defects in production materials.

2. ***Preparedness and prevention***

Societies and organizations must have sufficient plans and mechanisms for crisis prevention. Early warning signs play a vital role, because it is almost impossible to prevent an event that has not been anticipated. The goal of prevention is to identify weaknesses within the system and to correct them before they lead to failure. There is a clear relationship between predicting crises and preparing to prevent them (Mohammad Rashad, *Crisis Management: Local and Global Experiences*, 1995, p.62).

3. ***Confrontation phase***

At this stage, measures are taken to limit the damage and to prevent it from spreading to other unaffected parts of the institution. Success depends on the level of preparedness and the degree of cooperation and coordination among all involved parties.

4. ***Recovery phase***

This phase includes implementing predesigned programs aimed at restoring normal operations. Recovery covers both tangible and intangible assets and seeks to gradually reestablish balance through planned strategies.

5. ***Learning and evaluation phase***

In this final phase, the organization evaluates what was achieved during the crisis response in order to improve future performance. The evaluation process provides valuable insights to help prevent the recurrence of similar crises (Ghassan Qasim, *Crisis Management: Principles and Applications*, 2015, pp.50–51).

It is also useful to assess the effectiveness of communication during the crisis. Such an assessment must rely on precise scientific criteria to ensure accuracy and objectivity. For this reason, scholars have compiled and classified the fundamental rules of crisis communication presented in various studies of public relations. These standards form a model that allows comparison between what crisis communication should ideally be and what actually occurs in practice (Ali Ajwah, *Public Relations Management between Administration, Strategy, and Crisis Management*, p.259).

3. Communication Skills Required of Public Relations Officers in Dealing with Crises

3.1 Leadership Skill

(Mahmoud Abd al-Alim, *Life Skills: Teaching and Learning*, 2010, p.33) said that Leadership is a form of communication between an individual and a group of people within the same environment. It involves the ability of one person's will, feelings, and vision to influence, guide, and direct others toward achieving a shared goal. In this context, the leader refers to the public relations officer whose role is to attract the group's attention, gain its respect and confidence, and represent its ideals. Every member of the group aspires to resemble this person, who embodies the ability to achieve the group's objectives and to manage its affairs successfully and efficiently.

3.1.1 Characteristics of a Good Leader

The most important qualities of an effective leader can be summarized as follows:

- Enthusiasm for collaborative and team-oriented work.
- Neat and professional appearance combined with high energy and stamina.
- Friendliness and approachability.
- Courtesy and tactfulness in dealing with others.
- Fairness and impartiality when dealing with team members.
- The ability to make sound decisions promptly and appropriately.

3.1.2 Group Leadership

Group leadership refers to a form of leadership in which every member of the group performs a role that matches his or her abilities. Each individual is capable of taking the lead in certain situations, and responsibilities are distributed among members according to their talents and strengths.

3.1.3 Characteristics of Leadership Style

According to (Mahmoud Abd al-Alim, *Life Skills: Teaching and Learning*, 2010, p.34)

- Initiative and sound judgment in handling situations.
- Perseverance and social engagement.
- Representation of the group in external interactions.
- The ability to establish successful public relations.
- The capacity for effective planning and timely decision making.

3.2 Negotiation Skill

Referring to (Nasser Zaidan, *Administrative Leadership Skills and Business Ethics*, 2014, p.30)

Cooperation, participation, and coordination all require a high degree of effective negotiation. Negotiation is a process of continuous dialogue and communication between two or more parties, who may be individuals representing themselves or institutions. The purpose of negotiation is to resolve disagreements or reach common understanding on shared interests for mutual benefit.

Successful negotiation depends on a set of requirements, including the negotiator's competence and the ability to organize and conduct the different stages of the negotiation process. These responsibilities fall primarily to the public relations officer.

3.2.1 Skills Required of the Public Relations Officer as a Negotiator

The field of negotiation has developed significantly because of its importance as a form of dialogue and interaction that employs refined communication techniques and modern media tools. An effective negotiator must possess eloquence, respect for others, and strong interpersonal skills.

He or she should have both technical and administrative expertise, supported by an appropriate level of education. Practical experience is also essential for refining negotiation talents, since experience enhances the ability to influence and to respond effectively to others.

Negotiation may occur face to face or through various means of communication. As communication technology has advanced, negotiators must be proficient in using modern tools, particularly digital platforms and the internet, which have expanded the scope of negotiation and brought parties closer together. Negotiation has become a daily necessity in both personal and institutional interactions.

Understanding the formal aspects of negotiation is also important. Negotiators should have equivalent levels of authority, a shared understanding of the language used, and a proper sense of meeting protocol, including seating arrangements and the order of speaking. These factors help create a comfortable atmosphere for all participants. Diplomatic negotiations in particular require familiarity with the relevant protocols.

3.2.2 Stages of Negotiation

(Nasser Zaidan, *Administrative Leadership Skills and Business Ethics*, 2014, p.30)

- **Analysis stage:** Preparation and detailed study of the subjects to be negotiated, including understanding the other party's opinions, reassessing one's own position, and identifying the opponent's strategy.
- **Planning stage:** Determining the main interests behind the negotiation, preparing an approach to manage the discussion, and identifying alternative solutions and flexible options to achieve realistic outcomes.
- **Discussion stage:** The core phase of the negotiation process, which requires sufficient time to understand the positions and intentions of the other party. It is important to present proposals positively and to avoid repeating those that have already been rejected.

3.3 Time Management Skill

(Mansi Mahmoud, *Life Skills: Teaching and Learning*, 2010, p.54)

Time is one of the most valuable resources equally available to all individuals. It represents an important asset for those who know how to invest it effectively. People differ in how they manage and use time. Time management involves planning, organizing, and implementing activities efficiently in order to achieve specific goals.

The purpose of time management is to achieve the greatest possible satisfaction of individual and organizational needs within the available time. Effective time management requires awareness, knowledge, and experience, since time is limited and human needs are many and diverse.

Time management is particularly critical in crisis situations. Prioritizing tasks according to their importance increases the ability of public relations officers to work efficiently and to complete essential duties promptly. Societies that manage time effectively are typically more productive and organized. Conversely, poor time management negatively affects the performance of all activities.

3.4 Additional Communication Skills Required in Crises

(Ali Mohammad, *Encyclopedia of Educational Terms*, 2011, p.210)

Predictive Skill:

This is the ability to think ahead about possible future events. Public relations officers use this skill to anticipate what may happen and to prepare accordingly.

Judgment Skill:

This skill involves applying available information and logical reasoning to reach general conclusions or final decisions. It is used both before and during crises to ensure appropriate responses.

Problem-Solving Skill:

Problem solving refers to the capacity to analyze complex situations and to design strategies for resolving obstacles that hinder progress within the organization. It involves identifying and applying suitable solutions to specific problems during a crisis.

In addition to these skills, public relations officers must prevent potential problems or crises within the institution, act promptly when sudden issues arise, and assess the consequences of such events. They must be capable of conducting scientific research, applying appropriate methodologies, and planning and executing public opinion surveys. They also need excellent writing skills to produce articles, reports, and press materials for both internal and external communication channels.

Public relations officers are responsible for organizing press conferences, preparing exhibitions, supervising events, and developing the general program for public relations activities. Their main objective is to strengthen the connection between the organization and its various internal and external audiences through effective communication (Rifaat Aref, *Principles of Human and Religious Public Relations*, 2012, p.176).

4. Communication Skills for Dealing with the Public During Crises

4.1 Persuasion Skill

(Medhat Mohammad, *Effective Communication Skills with Others*, 2015, pp.168–169)

Persuasion is the effort of one party to influence another to accept certain ideas or opinions through the use of logical evidence and reasoning that appeal to the mind. The ability to persuade begins with personal conviction before extending to the task of convincing others. A public relations officer must first be convinced of the message he or she intends to deliver in order to persuade others of its validity.

Persuasion is one of the essential skills for a public relations officer. It relies primarily on communication competence and is applied in personal interviews, group discussions, meetings, negotiations, awareness programs, guidance sessions, and conversations with leaders and officials. Through persuasion, the officer builds trust, strengthens understanding, and encourages cooperation between the organization and its audiences.

4.2 Presentation and Public Speaking Skills

(Aliya Ramadan, *Communication Skills*, 2018, pp.85–86)

The effectiveness of a spoken message depends largely on how it is presented. A public relations officer contributes to the success of verbal communication by demonstrating confidence, mental clarity, and self-awareness, along with an understanding of the audience. To achieve these outcomes, the officer should:

- Prepare the audience to listen attentively.
- Maintain their interest and focus until the end of the presentation.
- Remain flexible, natural, and composed throughout the interaction.

These skills help the communicator ensure that the message is delivered clearly and persuasively, even under the pressure of a crisis situation.

4.3 Dialogue Skill

(Abd Allah Hasan Muslim, *Administrative Communication Skills*, 2010, pp.49–50)

According to al-Dosari, dialogue skills refer to the ability to communicate and interact constructively within a discussion that takes place in an atmosphere of psychological and social positivity. Such dialogue should be free of bias, intolerance, and coercion, and it should allow every participant to express ideas openly without objection or hostility. The purpose of dialogue is to reach sound conclusions based on logical evidence and reasoning that strengthen social and institutional cohesion.

Effective dialogue requires specific communication abilities as well as adherence to procedural rules and ethical norms that guide the discussion and ensure that its objectives are achieved. Public relations officers must master these skills in order to manage conversations effectively during crises, when tensions are high and accurate communication is essential for restoring confidence and stability.

Conclusion

It is evident from this analysis that the role of public relations is no longer limited to improving an organization's image or enhancing its performance. It has become impossible to imagine any modern institution operating without a functional structure that ensures genuine internal and external communication. The responsibilities of the public relations officer are therefore central to the success of the institution. Without them, the organization cannot progress or maintain a positive reputation.

The efforts made by public relations officers to help an organization overcome crises that threaten its development and continuity depend largely on their mastery of communication skills. These abilities enable the crisis management team to perform its duties effectively and to protect the organization from potential harm. As the saying goes, if an organization is not already in crisis, it is most likely on the verge of one.

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