Crisis Management through Crisis Communication: Lessons from a Higher Educational Institution

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Abstract

All higher educational institutions experience different types of crises. In the early 2020, higher educational institutions experienced various types of crises and these crises tested the resiliency of every institution. This case study aimed to examine how a higher educational institutions in a highly urbanized city managed the crises it faced during the pandemic especially in the area of crisis communication. It aimed to describe how the subject institution utilized crisis communication during the COVID-19 Pandemic; determine the effectiveness of crisis communication in addressing concerns; and proposed improvements that can be made to crisis communications in higher educational institutions. An asynchronous interview was employed by the researcher with 17 members of the management team. This study found out that the manger participants have had concerns with the well-being of their family, the quality in delivering their service products to the customers, and job security, that the methods employed by subject university resulted in a positive reception of the crisis communication message. While the sentiments of the respondents were mostly positive, there were unmistakable shortcomings such as concerns or questions from stakeholder not being addressed in a timely and supportive manner. While the subject institution is not uniquely affected by the pandemic, its crisis communication response may help the progress and development of crisis communication across different industries and organizational cultures.

Keywords: Crisis Communication, Crisis Management, Pandemic, Higher Education Institution

Introduction

Crisis communications is a key element in effective crisis management. Its role is to help ensure the continued operational effectiveness of an organization during and after a major incident, provide guidance and reassurance to those affected, and safeguard the organization's reputation. (Goh, 2019) The approach to crisis communication has also evolved to having "proactive, reactive and post-evaluative crisis communication stages, thereby moving away from seeing crisis communication as a predominantly reactive function. (Botha Slabbert & Barker, 2011) Context and specific circumstances have its influence. "Always listen to stakeholders for feedback to inform and adapt messages that can better meet communications needs as they constantly change. Not all crises are equal; their intensity and longevity can fluctuate." (Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2017).

The University of Baguio (UB) is a family-owned business that began as a two-classroom technical and vocational school called Baguio Tech in 1948. Over the years, it grew into a university with over 14,000 students and 700 employees in both Basic and Higher education sectors. UB is

among 71 out of 1,975 Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in the Philippines granted autonomous status by the Commission on Higher Education. Tourism, Dentistry, Nursing, Medical Laboratory Science, and Criminology are some of its most popular and best performing programs. Essential to the success of these programs are the provisions for students to learn in a practical work environment.

UB officials suspended work and classes in all levels beginning March 13, 2020 in compliance with an order from the mayor. (Public Information Office - City of Baguio, 2020) While the initial order was precautionary and intended to be temporary, on 16 March 2020, President Duterte put Metro Manila and the entire island group of Luzon under the "enhanced community quarantine" – or the total lockdown of the largest island group in the Philippines. Soon after, major cities were also put under lockdown. (Hapal, 2021) The Department of Education (DepEd) announced its compliance with President Rodrigo Duterte's order to suspend face-to-face classes until a vaccine for the coronavirus disease 2019 (Covid-19) is available. (Carl, 2020) The Commission on Higher Education says colleges and universities following the new school calendar will no longer require students to attend face-to-face classes in the light of the COVID-19 crisis. (CNN Philippines Staff, 2020) Since then, no in-campus classes had resumed until eight months later in January 2021 when medical related programs were allowed to have interns and on-the-job trainees resume on site duties. (GMA News Online, 2021)

UB officials met in late February 2020 to discuss the possibility and effects of a city-wide suspension of classes and work. One or two weeks of suspended classes would be a manageable disruption, but anything longer would be a real problem. This "lockdown" was expected to be temporary and precautionary, but UB officials were contemplating worst-case scenarios. UB had just recently concluded consultations on an increase for school fees with employees and students, and notified CHED of its implementation for August 2020. With the midterm exams scheduled in a few weeks, UB had also just begun construction of a building in January 2020 to accommodate the growing student population. UB has experienced crises in the form of natural disasters, security threats, health concerns, and public relations incidents. Still, the COVID-19 pandemic presented a unique situation where an entirely new education delivery method would be implemented, requiring new policies, procedures, and guidelines (PPGs) for students, teachers, and all UB workers. (Annex A) A trial-and-error approach was necessary for the quick implementation of "distance-learning." The constant changes in government policies and regulations complicated execution of all plans and caused much anxiety on all stakeholders. Students were concerned about how they would progress toward their degrees. Teachers were concerned about the quality of education they could provide. Administrators were concerned about managing a campus from their homes. There were strategies to cope with the effects of a lockdown, but effectively communicating it to stakeholders would determine the level of success.

Literature Review

Communication strategies vary in every academic institutions depending on the kind or nature of the crises. Regardless of the severity and the strategy employed, all academic institutions use crises communication strategies. O'Neill, B., & Kelley, R. (2021). It has been noted that the University of Florida use social media platforms including Facebook and Twitter to facilitate their communication to ensure public engagement as pointed out by Thelen, P., & Robinson, K. (2019).

Moerschell, L., & Novak, S. (2020) mentioned in their research that Academic institutions surely face the challenge in crisis communication especially when it comes to communication strategies across different stages of crisis. This also includes the challenge of different orientations from different fields. Moreover, the rapid spread of information through the different social media plat-

forms may distort the reality and creates different public opinions that may disturb the reputation of the academic institution Zou, S. (2023).

Many researchers point out that social media is a very essential tool for effective crisis management in academic settings (Slagle, D. 2022).The leaders or the managers in an academic institution play an important role in crisis communication. It is with this reason that this research was conceptualized. Also, researchers posit that academic intuitions should have a strategic crisis communication.

To further emphasize that crisis management should not be treated as a reactive function, "three elements emerge from the internal perspective's focus on organizational preparedness: First, organizing for high reliability is often treated as a cognitive and behavioral task. Second, numerous studies suggest that high-reliability organizations are more capable of preventing crises. Third, other factors may influence the likelihood of a crisis occurring, including organizational culture and structure. While not directly studied, it can be assumed that the cultural and structural factors increasing the likelihood of a crisis also make it more difficult to organize for reliability." (Brundy et al., 2017)

Developing crisis response strategies is about understanding the situation – but it is also about designing good messages. For this reason, good crisis communication is also about developing crisis strategy based on theory. (Diers-Lawson, 2019) In his Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) Model, author Timothy Coombs distinguishes three different clusters of crisis: (1) Victim: Where the organization is a victim of the crisis (e.g. natural disasters, rumours) – minor reputational threat; (2) Accident: Where the organizational actions leading to the crisis were unintentional (e.g. equipment or product failure, accusations from external stakeholders) – medium reputational threat; (3) Intentional: Where the organization knowingly took inappropriate risk – major reputational threat. Additionally, these threats are intensified by crisis history and prior reputation. Once the levels of crisis responsibility and reputational threat have been determined, a set of primary crisis response strategies can be taken. (1) Denial (attacking the accuser, denial of the story, scapegoating); (2) Diminishment (offering excuses, justification of what happened); (3) Rebuilding (compensation of victims, offering apologies, taking full responsibility). (Holdsworth, 2014) From the article written by Jodi Amendola, a Forbes Agency Council member and CEO of Amendola - a healthcare and technology public relations and marketing agency, there are four best practices for crisis communication. Deliberate planning, Admission of faults, Respond quickly, Post-crisis care. (Amendola, 2019) These recommendations align with recommendations in the article written by Debra Davenport, PhD for Purdue University Online titled: The 3 Most Effective Crisis Communication Strategies. In it she recommends planning ahead, speed as key, and being responsibly transparent. (Davenport, n.d.) However, there is an opinion that best practices in crisis communication are often aspirational; easier said than done.

Crafting the message is only part of the solution. Delivery of that message is crucial, and the role of social media in crisis communication cannot be understated. "Social media plays two important roles in crisis communication. One important role is the propagation and response of crisis events in university and other to bringing positive influence to the crisis management. (Motwani et al., 2021) It is also seen that "social media is an important channel for delivering real-time urgent news and emergency notifications, not only because citizens spend a considerable amount of time utilizing social media each day, but because citizens now expect to learn about breaking news from social media first. According to Insignia Communications, social media is changing the way that consumers learn about breaking news because it: (1) Usually breaks on social media first. (2) Crosses geographic boundaries more quickly. (3) Is informed by multiple first hand, though often unofficial sources. (4) Is commented upon by active social media users, which further shares and

distributes the content. Even journalists now watch social media to identify and report breaking news stories. According to Insignia Communications, 77 percent of journalists say social media is important to them for learning about potential stories more quickly, and the same percentage say social media is important in reporting stories more quickly." (CivicPlus, n.d.)

Theoretical Framework

The SCCT Model provides a framework for organizations to systematically address crisis communication with primary response strategies. This study used the model as a tool to highlight the positive and negative communication practices of UB during the COVID-19 crisis for the purposes of learning from its experience. This study has documented the crisis communication response, the feedback to that response, and was then compared to the SCCT model for crisis clusters and primary response strategies to serve as basis for recommendations. The case study approach was particularly useful to employ when there was a need to obtain an in-depth appreciation of an issue, event or phenomenon of interest, in its natural real-life context. Collecting data on how the crisis communication response of UB to the COVID-19 pandemic was done through a survey of executives. Crisis communication is subjectively measured, and public sentiment is difficult to measure. A survey from executives showcased information unavailable to the general public and still reasonably reflect what their clients share; thereby serving as a proxy for public sentiment. The survey results in addition to publicly available communication documents and first-hand observation from the researcher has provided valid and credible representation of the crisis communication practices and results.

Significance of the Study

This study provided the academic and business community with situational real world data that could help the progress of crisis communication theory and help organizations design their own crisis communication plans.

Objectives of the Study

The study intended to give a clear picture of how crisis communication was used by a higher educational institutions as it faced the challenges brought by the Pandemic. To address this, the following specific objectives were sought to be addressed:

1.   the concerns of the members of the management of the subject higher educational institution;
2.   strategies employed by the members of the management to address challenges; and
3.   interventions of the University to address the challenges
4.   successful interventions as perceived by the participants
5.   gaps to be addressed for improvement as perceived by the participants

Methodology

This section presents the research design, population and locale of the study, data gathering tool and procedure, treatment of the data, and the ethical considerations observed in the conduct of the study.

Research Design

The researcher employed qualitative descriptive method, which allows data from different perspectives, providing for a richer presentation of the crisis communication practices used in the real world COVID-19 crisis. Descriptions of the subject university crisis communication strategies employed during the COVID-19 pandemic were taken from the following sources:

1.   Asynchronous interview: Each member of the management team was asked the same open-ended questions through anonymous interview. A thematic analysis was then conducted by

associating codes to various phrases in their responses. These codes were used in identifying themes to form a condensed overview of the main points and common meaning that recur throughout the data.

2.   Publicly available documents and social media posts: Messages intended for public consumption were accessed from the subject University bulletin board, released memoranda, policies, procedures, guidelines, non-confidential employee emails, the subject University Facebook page and website.

The study included 34 members of the management to have an access to the asynchronous interview but only 17 members of management willingly participated. This data gathering tool was convenient for the members of the management as they are busy and this also avoided bias and conflict of interest. After the endorsement of the ethics reviewers, the researcher sent the guide questions to the management through the help of the Research Innovation Extension and Community Outreach (RIECO) Office. The members of the management were given a month to answer the guide questions at their most convenient time.

Treatment of Data
A thematic analysis approach was employed by the researcher. Hence, the collected data was summarized and the researcher familiarized himself with the data, after which the process of coding the responses began. The coded data were then examined and fit into themes. The themes were then used as basis to confirm available documents from UB and observations of the researcher.

Ethical Considerations
The researcher followed the ethical principles of voluntariness, anonymity, confidentiality, autonomy, beneficence, and informed consent. In order to protect the image of the University, the research made used of code name as, "Subject University". Following a presentation of the significance of the study and the benefits that will be derived from it, respondents were informed that participation is voluntary. The researcher does not know the respondents' identities and personal information granted. The study's findings will be presented in a public lecture and no names will be revealed in the presentation of the results.

Results and Discussion
Based on first hand recollection of the members of the management, subject University executives had already anticipated the possibility of an extended suspension of classes and work before the lockdown was announced. The executives were predicting the lockdown would not last more than two weeks. With the pandemic conditions not improving and lockdown extending to the end of the semester, Subject University prepared an alternative learning method. Teachers would teach through Zoom or Google Meet, and leniency provided to help students meet requirements. This solution was deliberated among members of the executive committee (EXECOM) and after preliminary meetings and discussion among academic, administrative, and finance council members, it was communicated officially in the form of memorandum and social media posting for the students and general public, and through Policies, Procedure, and Guidelines (PPG) document for teachers and employees ahead of any announcement by regulators. (J. Lonogan, Memorandum, April 7, 2020) The goal was to lower anxiety and allow students and teachers an element of certainty and clarity moving forward. In May 2020, an "online learning primer" was given to give students and teachers to prepare them for the short term beginning June 2020 and the full semester in August 2020. The sentiments of the "subject university" executives were taken from seventeen (17) of the thirty-five (35) members of the management team who responded to the survey.

Concerns during the Pandemic

Based on the response of the executives, delivery of service was the most prevalent challenge, and was divided into two sub-themes. Delivery of service refers to the ability of the individual to do their work. On the other hand, quality of service points to the effectivity and efficiency of the individual when doing their work. One of the executives is concerned about the "integrity of student assessments." Many of the participants were also concerned about their wellbeing and those of family and colleagues. Physical and mental health are mentioned often, with Manager 1 concerned about getting infected, saying, "I will have Covid-19 and bring home the disease to my family." Job security was also a widespread concern among these executives. Several executives brought up concerns on enrollment numbers, with an executive anxious about "teacher's salary in case classes will not resume."

Table 1. Concerns of the participant managers

Themes	Sub-themes	Codes
Concerns in the delivery of service	Delivery of Lessons	Laboratory and internship
		Teaching Delivery
	Delivery of Other services	Emergency response
		Assisting community
		Procurement of equipment and supplies
		Business Transactions
Concerns on the Quality of Service	Delivery of Service by the educators	Preparing the Graduating Students
		Reliability of Assessment
		Unfinished Curriculum
		Internet connectivity of employees
	Reception of the services by the learners	Internet connectivity of students
		Student training
Wellbeing	Welfare of Staff	
	Infection and family welfare	
	Mental Health	
Job Security	Enrollment	
	Collection of Payment	
	Salary-Compensation-Benefits	
	Completion of Research Targets	
	Teacher salary if no classes	
	UB Liquidity	

Apparently, concerns raised were recognized by the members of the management team as evidenced by the memorandum and PPG released on online learning and work from home guidelines (J. Lonogan, PPG "Works from Home", March 1, 2020). The concern for wellbeing was expected and addressed through another memorandum. (B. Abaya, UB Precautionary Measures, March 3, 2020) The EXECOM designed guidelines to emphasize work output and productivity to work around absence from the campus to address job security concerns. The president intimated to the EXECOM that the pandemic is not likely to be over in a year and UB needed to prepare for one

year of significantly reduced enrollment. Until enrollment and fee collection data prove otherwise, *subject university* would need to reduce costs. In the SCCT Model, the situation allows subject university to communicate to its audience that it is a victim of circumstances, and therefore there is minimal reputational threat. Still, subject university responds with diminishment and rebuilding strategies, rather than settle merely on denial of fault.

Interventions by the Higher Educational Institution to Address the Concerns

As presented in Table 2, online services played a major role in addressing concerns of the pandemic. The ability to teach a course or conduct client transactions online was mentioned. An executive stated "Students and parents were oriented on the new normal education." A constant stream of online meetings resulted in evolving policies, procedures, and guidelines with over 25 memoranda and PPG documents issued solely for pandemic issues. Survival was also apparent with some extreme but temporary measures taken to address concerns, with an executive mentioning "no retrenchment, thus employees were able to provide for their family needs." The president emphasized to the EXECOM that financial liquidity would be an issue unless addressed early on with layoffs or pay cuts. This message was sent from the EXECOM to the UB Faculty, Employees, and Workers Union. The extreme possibilities were recognized and grudgingly accepted. To prevent layoffs, pay cuts would be implemented. Good data from enrollment and collection of school fees would indicate healthy cash flow and regular pay would resume. The pay cuts were implemented to extreme levels in June 2020 before short term enrollment data was available, and less extreme levels in July 2020. Regular pay resumed in August 2020. Leniency was also recognized, for students and employees. An executive stated that they had "flexible work schedules during lockdowns."

Table 2. Interventions by the Higher Educational Institution to Address the Concerns

Themes	Sub-themes
Online Services	Online Learning Delivery
	Online meetings to address concerns
	Subscription to Online Learning Service
	Move to alternative payment modes
	TELE enhanced learning
Survival Tactics	Upskilling and training
	Retro-fitting for eventual F2F
	Offices with no clients help busier operations
	Offices with no clients help busier operations
	Work-from-home scheme
	Reduced salary for June/July
	No lay-offs
Leniency	Extension of research deadlines
	Leniency on student requirements
	UB provisions to employees/students
	Monitoring student performance
Guidelines	Flexible Learning Approach Primer
	Policies for online services
	UB memos and guidance
	Occupational Health and Safety Guidelines

The president asked the management team to push as far as they could go with regards to deadlines and requirements of their students and subordinates. Employees were also asked to work beyond their traditional job descriptions to assist in over-burdened departments. Guidelines featured heavily among the executives as a way concerns were addressed. "Assessments of modalities are done and results are used for further improvement of programs." An example of this is the document on policies, procedures, and guidelines released for COVID-19 prevention and mitigation. (B. Ab-aya, COVID-19 Policies and Protocols, March 1, 2020) Again, the SCCT Model shows that the situation allows UB to communicate to its audience that it is a victim of circumstances, and therefore there is minimal reputational threat. Still, UB responds with diminishment and rebuilding strategies, rather than settle merely on denial of fault.

Strengths of the Interventions Employed by the UB Management

Table 3 indicates that supportive communication was highlighted by the respondents to be among the right ways to handle the crisis. As one of the managers observed, "The open line of communication where everyone will share their suggestions especially on academic operations during daily and weekly meetings was very effective." Evidence of the supportive language can be seen in the released memoranda and PPG. The availability of options was also appreciated. "For faculty members (particularly those who were near the retirement age) who felt that they cannot do online teaching, they were given the option to apply for early retirement." The management team recognized that everyone had unique situations and circumstances that was affected by the pandemic. This recognition was communicated to the stakeholders for the purpose of making requirements easier to accept. Working toward tangible outputs also reflected positively with executives. "It was a commendable action that UB immediately communicated measures or gave instructions as to how learning and work can still continue. The Learning Continuity Plan, and the Alternative Plans for interns were immediately put in place."

Table 3. Strengths of the Interventions Employed by the UB Management

Themes	Sub-themes
Supportive Communication	Messages of president provided some assurance
	Gather data for better contribution in discussions
	Multiple meetings with open line of communication
	Updates on infected employee number and departments
	Meetings were collaborative
	Immediate actions after meetings and inquiries
	Immediate response to inquiries
Availability of Options	Group chats and online platforms
	Option for early retirement
	Leniency on student requirements
	UB helped some affected students and employees
	LMS options to determine which best suited needs
	Risk taking allowed
	Alternative payment methods
	Work from home
Tangible Outputs	Retrofitting of facilities
	Transparency with policies
	Tracing Student Internet Connectivity

Themes	Sub-themes
	Memos disseminated information
	PPG to monitor implementation plan
	Continued preparations for virtual accreditation
	Learning Continuity Plan

As mentioned earlier, over 25 memoranda and PPG documents were released solely to address pandemic issues. In this situation, the SCCT Model expects UB to communicate to its audience this is an accident since preparedness would mitigate the impact of the crisis. Since supportive communication and availability of options is a response to achieve diminishment and rebuilding strategies, the response was appropriate.

Challenges Encountered by the UB Management While Implementing Interventions

Table 4 shows that most of the executives did not highlight any wrong crisis communication actions. However, those executives that did, mention poor execution and unfair implementation. An executive replied that "concern or questions from stakeholder are not being answered/addressed in a timely and supportive manner." Another executive states that "reduction of pay at the time the amount was needed. It demoralized colleagues, hence it was very hard to demand outputs from them." During the course of business under COVID-19 restrictions, some policies were not followed or implemented in favor of maintaining continued operations. These included implementation without going through the normal procedures, and requesting work outside the confines of the normal job description. The provision of reducing salary as the COVID-19 lockdowns were implemented was in order to maintain UB operations in the strong case that enrollment numbers would go down or collections would be delayed. During this uncertain time, all employees grew anxious and resented that their salaries are reduced but still expected to provide output. While the work from home scheme reduced deliverables and even household expenses like travel and parking in some cases, employees were quick to welcome the return to onsite work, and the reduced salaries was returned to pre-pandemic levels. The SCCT Model indicates that any "intentional" crisis must be met with a "rebuilding" response. In the case of UB, the administration did not provide adequate communication or explanation together with the returning to regular work practices and regular salaries.

Table 4. Challenges Encountered by the UB Management While Implementing Interventions

Data privacy issues	Confidentiality during contact tracing
	Online payment without real time posting
Issue on Proper Communication	No replies and poor feedback from colleagues
	Delayed feedback to inquiries
	Emotionless replies
	Inadequate information released
Issue on Fairness	Fairness in output equivalent salary
	Reduction in pay
	Extent of support to employees not clearly defined
	Too accommodating and did not set boundaries
Increased Expenditures on the part of the Employees	Increased out of pocket costs of teachers

Data privacy issues	Confidentiality during contact tracing
	Offering online platform without adequate manpower
	No single office in charge of crisis management
	Student welfare took all the focus from employee welfare
	Allowing underqualified employees/teachers to remain
	No sense of urgency on collaborations
	Evaluation of students remain unaddressed
	No definition of recalibrated fees

As presented in Table 5, most of the members of the management did not mention any gap in the implementation of their interventions. For those that did, they highlighted unfair implementation. As one of the managers observed, "…Letting teachers or employees stay in the academe even if they are not already capable of teaching or doing their role/functions." It was also mentioned that some concerns were treated as unimportant. "Remarks from inspectors are already concerns we've seen and raised but taken for granted." The SCCT Model would expect UB to treat this as a major reputational threat related to accidental or intentional crisis. The response of UB was underwhelming since a rebuilding response, such as public reprimands and remedies were not provided.

Table 5. Gaps in Crisis communication During the Crisis

Defined Themes	Sample answers
Unfair implementation	Increased out of pocket costs of teachers
	Offering online platform without adequate manpower
	No single office in charge of crisis management
	Student welfare took all the focus from employee welfare
	Allowing underqualified employees/teachers to remain
Treatment of Concerns as unimportant	No sense of urgency on collaborations
	Evaluation of students remain unaddressed
	No definition of recalibrated fees

To sum it up, it was reestablished in the findings of this research that communication management is very significant in crisis management. Crisis communication must be properly used. Communication was the main key to reach out to the stake holders.

Conclusions
The subject university responded to COVID-19 crisis with actions that addressed concerns related to delivery and quality of service, wellbeing, and job security through online chats, virtual meetings, social media, memoranda, policies, procedures, and guidelines. These methods resulted in a positive reception of the crisis communication. The participants appreciated the availability of online services to address their concerns. The quick and decisive move towards online services may have provided confidence in the direction subject university would take.

The executives also recognized the extreme circumstances that necessitated drastic solutions, the leniency in the messages and the commitment to providing guidelines. An empathetic approach to constructing the message may have contributed to cooperative attitudes during the crisis, with

supportive language, availability of options, and documented output. The nature of a pandemic frames the organization as the "victim" of a natural disaster, therefore providing minimal reputational damage. Still, there is little tolerance by stakeholders for mistakes and miscalculations since the pandemic affected everyone. Transparency and candidness in communications seemed to help for better understanding between the organization and its stakeholders.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study and the preceding conclusions, the researcher recommends adjustments to existing policies to emphasize the communication elements of crisis response. While the sentiments of the respondents were mostly positive, there were unmistakable shortcomings. The crisis communication messages failed to address poorly executed plans, unfair results of plans, and concerns that appeared unimportant and remained unaddressed. Crisis communication should not end with a statement, but with action and reviews. Resolution can be found in concluding statements or reformative actions. Communication related to preparations, such as prepared template statements; and communication related to feedback such as satisfaction surveys, will help improve crisis response and crisis mitigation.

Crisis communication requires planning and commitment, but the organization will benefit in the long run and prevent many complications from arising. While the University of Baguio is not uniquely affected by the pandemic, its crisis communication response may help the progress and development of crisis communication across different industries and organizational cultures.

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