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Teaching the crisis management/communication course

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Abstract

Crisis management is not a specific content area mentioned in *A Port of Entry*, The Report of the Commission on Public Relations Education issued in 1999. However, crisis management moves the public relations role to the managerial function and requires the development of many skills and knowledge points mentioned in the report. A course or unit in crisis management/communication is an excellent way of teaching public relations theory, management concepts, information management, problem solving, and communication management. Crisis management also reinforces the value of following current events as real-time crises can be integrated into teaching. Through a unit or a course, crisis management/communication provides an engaging mechanism for teaching management-oriented concepts that every organization needs. © 2001 Elsevier Science Inc. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

Crisis management continues to be a growth area in public relations. While not specifically mentioned as a course or topic area in the 1999 Commission Report, a number of the knowledge and skills covered in the Report are developed in a crisis management course.¹ The knowledge elements of a crisis management course include business management and public relations theories. The skills developed in a crisis management course include the management of information, management of communication, strategic planning, problem solving, message production, and issues management.

Units on crisis management often are found in the Principles course, Public Relations Writing course, and the Public Relations Planning and Management course. The need for crisis management in practice increases each year as technology and stakeholders continue to create new crises and pressure how organizations should respond to crises. Along with the growth in practice has come the development of crisis management/communication courses

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at colleges and universities. This article provides a format for developing a course dedicated to crisis management/communication. Such a course would be an elective in the public relations curriculum taken by advanced students (juniors or seniors). The course can even be refined to function on the graduate level. I begin by identifying the objectives of the course, move to discussions of the main topics and evaluations, and conclude with a few pieces of advice and a list of readings.

2. Objectives

The crisis management course can be built around a set of nine objectives which can be divided into three categories: (1) how to approach crisis management, (2) understanding key concepts, and (3) developing essential skills and abilities for crisis management. The discussion of the objectives will follow these three divisions.

2.1. *Approaching crisis management*

(1) “An appreciation of the ongoing approach to crisis management.”

Crisis experts from a number of fields have shown that crises and crisis management progress through distinct phases.² The demands of each phase vary, requiring that different concepts and skills be applied by the crisis management team. For instance, sensing a crisis is not the same as the initial response to a crisis. Sensing a crisis involves collecting and analyzing information for potential sources of risk. The initial response requires an evaluation of the crisis situation and selection of appropriate crisis response strategies. The phases create a perpetual loop. The final evaluation of a crisis management effort (the last phase) is used to improve performance during earlier phases of the process. Crisis management should be treated as a complex set of interrelated ideas and skills. A crisis manager must know when different ideas and skills are needed. The ongoing approach explains the different demands of the phases and how they work together to form a unified crisis management effort.

2.2. *Understanding key concepts*

(2) “An understanding of the core elements for the crisis sensing mechanism.”

The crisis sensing mechanism is the organization’s crisis radar-bits system for collecting information about potential crises. An organization will miss the chance to prevent crises if it lacks an effective system for collecting and evaluating information about potential crises. A crisis sensing mechanism can be built around three elements: issues management, risk management, and relationship management. Organizations routinely collect information about issues that may affect them, potential risk factors they face, and the quality of stakeholder relationships. Issues, risks, and relationships are common sources for risks that have the potential to become crises. Crisis managers must know how to identify and evaluate each of the three. It follows that crisis managers should know about issues management, risk management, and relationship management. Understanding issues management, risk man-

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