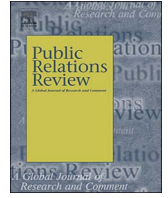
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## Factors that influence organisational crisis perception from an internal stakeholder's point of view

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### ABSTRACT

This paper starts from the premise that crisis is a perception and that one of the best ways to conquer a crisis is not to allow it to develop in the first place. By detecting or perceiving a crisis before other stakeholders do, an organisation can prevent or mitigate a crisis. Few studies have considered the question of whether organisations put the right people in the right places to be able to see a crisis coming. Within an organisation, managers are usually well placed to take decisions to initiate crisis communication, but they seem to be reluctant to do so or may not wish to see an impending crisis. Communication professionals should have a better perception of a crisis, but they rarely find themselves in a position to have a substantial impact on the management decision to communicate during a crisis. In this paper, we study crisis perception by individuals in a large governmental organisation during various stages of an unfolding crisis and compared perception scores to individual profiles based on study background, professional situation and crisis experience. This study involves a large-scale scenario-driven survey with 'crisis perception' as the main dependent variable. The results of this specific case indicate that an academic communication degree, a high hierarchical position in the organisation and crisis experience are positively related to an augmented perception of an impending organisational crisis.

### 1. Introduction

An incident evolves into a crisis when someone perceives it as such. This understanding arises from the definition of a crisis by [Coombs \(2014\)](#): “a crisis is a perception of an unpredictable event that threatens important expectancies of stakeholders related to health, safety, environmental and economic issues, and which can seriously impact an organisation's performance and generate negative outcomes” (p. 3). We can furthermore deduce from this definition that, as long as no one perceives a situation as a crisis, there will be no crisis. Following good practices in communication, when an organisation is the first to perceive an impending crisis, it has the advantage of having more time to gather information and to communicate proactively through organisational crisis communication ([Coombs, 2014](#); [Williams, Bourgeois, & Croyle, 1993](#)). The perception of a possible crisis occurs through individual staff members, and thus it is in the interest of an organisation to have the right people in the right places. Therefore, this study focuses on the rarely researched viewpoints of individual members of an organisation during a pre-crisis phase. A person's profile may have an influence on his or her individual perception or awareness of a situation as a crisis. The research question of this study is as follows: how does the individual profile of a member of an organisation relate to crisis perception from within that same organisation? Based on the literature, we derived several hypotheses delineating the role of individual profiles in (pre-)crisis perceptions.

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We will test these assumptions in the context of a large governmental organisation through a large-scale survey that includes different scenarios in an unfolding crisis situation.

The contribution of this research to the profession of public relations and crisis communication is a better understanding of how organisations can gain strategically valuable time by perceiving a crisis early and by choosing the right people to do so. To contribute to public relations and crisis communication theory, this research uncovers some of the dynamics in play during a pre-crisis phase, a crucial moment in a developing crisis and an aspect that has not been fully researched.

## 2. Theoretical framework

### 2.1. Conceptualizing organisational crises

To be able to conceptualize and afterwards measure crisis perception by individual members from within an organisation, a concise and clear working definition of crisis is indispensable. Based on the most cited authors in the crisis communication literature, we constructed a working definition of crisis for this research (Benoit, 1997; Coombs, 2014; Fink, 1986; Hermann, 1963; James, Wooten & Dushek, 2011; Mitroff, 2001; Mitroff, Shrivastava, & Udwardia, 1987; Pearson & Clair, 1998; Tjosvold, 1984; Ulmer, Sellnow, & Seeger, 2013):

A crisis starts to evolve when a stakeholder perceives that an organisation can no longer meet his expectations. Initially, very little information is available on the ongoing situation, which may impede the decision to communicate and can endanger the organisation's interests. A crisis attracts the attention of other stakeholders and of the media, depending on the responsibility attributed to the organisation by the stakeholders and on the organisational communication, which may amplify or play down the crisis'.

A more visual approach to the concept of crisis perception can be found in Marynissen, Pieters, Van Dorpe, van het Erve and Vergeer (2010), who studied the need for information during an organisational crisis. Fig. 1 shows that at first the available information on an incident evoking a crisis is not sufficient to allow management to take fully informed decisions to solve the crisis. The initial information is even less sufficient to fulfil the stakeholders' needs for it. However, not communicating will lead to an information vacuum. The organisation should fill that vacuum with its own information; others, however, may fill it with rumours, opinions, grievances, etc.

Fig. 1 shows a time lapse (double-pointed arrow) between an incident and the moment when someone perceives it as a crisis. The organisation can use that time to better prepare its communication and for potentially mitigating the situation. Any stakeholder can perceive an event as a crisis, which is the reason an organisation had better not wait too long to communicate, to avoid having to take up a defensive role. The self-disclosure strategy of stealing thunder (Arpan & Roskos-Ewoldsen, 2005), in which an organisation announces the crisis itself, is one way to take the communication lead in a crisis. By doing so, an organisation gains credibility and can frame that communication, which becomes much more difficult to do when they are not the first to communicate (Williams et al., 1993).

Considering the above and the role of communication during a crisis, as made explicit in our working definition, crisis communication is therefore a strategic policy instrument which calls for communication expertise, as we will further demonstrate. The earlier an organisation can communicate about a crisis, the higher the chances of success, if the communication is in line with what stakeholders expect. Early communication does imply, however, that an organisation perceives a crisis first. But as perception occurs

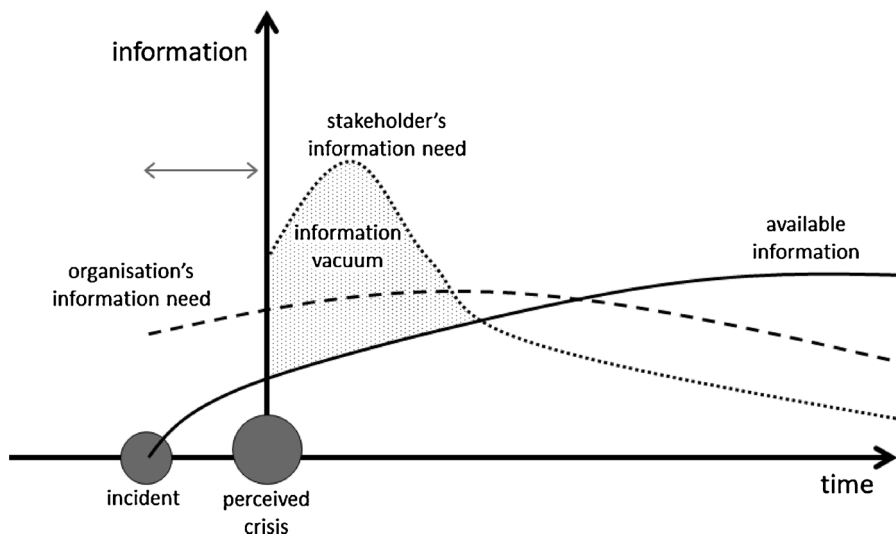


Fig. 1. Needs and availability of information during a crisis (adapted from Marynissen et al., 2010).

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