Lessons From Katrina: Crisis Communication And Rhetorical Protocol

Donald C. Smith, (E-mail DCSmith@newhaven.edu), University of New Haven

ABSTRACT

Widely misunderstood and often maligned, rhetoric in the simplest sense is the effective use of language in speech or writing. Much as law and medicine have well considered standards of conduct, so too does the field of communication. Experts in this area look at "patterns" of discourse in relation to specific kinds of events – tornadoes, hurricanes, floods, fires, airline or mining disasters, for example. Close study of such phenomenon reveals which communication approaches to crisis are successful and which are not. As a profession, rhetoricians study the structure and consequences of communication events. Applying rhetorical analysis to situations as significant in scope as Katrina allows us to determine what business, media, and government can learn from that unprecedented day in the Summer of 2005. This paper concludes with a practical communication model, (R.E.S.P.O.N.D.), which can be applied in any crisis situation real or anticipated.

INTRODUCTION

C risis is not unimaginable. Indeed every organization can and should expect to experience some kind of crisis during its lifetime. No company, country, or individual is immune. From the perspective of Organization Theory and Design crisis affects the stability of a system; threatens its homeostasis or balance, Katz (1966); Tubbs (2007). From a personal perspective crisis is anything that handicaps response. In every case, crisis exists when that which could once be done, can be done no more.

Divorce parts families. Earthquakes bring down buildings. Fires burn away forests and homes; mines collapse. Tsunamis wash away residents and resorts. Terrorists try to create a climate of fear. All of these <u>can</u> be imagined and anticipated, and *because* this is so; it is possible to plan, wholly or in part, for any conceivable threat. As a discipline Public Relations has operated under this assumption since the 20th century, and rhetorical theory, at least since the 5th century B.C., has been laying the foundation for a universal crisis communication model. When crisis is conceived of as *process*, the need for a rhetorical model becomes obvious. To that end, this paper provides a critical examination of the communication issues generated by Katrina and concludes with a practical and rhetorically oriented model of communication which can be applied to any situation real or anticipated.

AUGUST 29TH, 2005: A RHETORICAL POSTMORTEM

Even now, looking back we wonder why. Why were so many people left in harm's way. To explain we need only take a look at the communication context in which the event occurred. "In all of the 20th Century only three category five hurricanes were recorded. Category 5 hurricanes, with winds faster than 155 mph, are rare with only three hitting the USA in the 20th century. . ."(Williams, 2005). This places the statistical likelihood of having experiencing one in the U.S. at only **.03%**.

For any threat to take hold, two things are necessary: first, people must understand the threat, and second, they must be capable of complying, (Watzlawick, 1977). At least four groups of people were in Katrina's path in August of 2005. First, were those who could leave and who did so with whatever money and resources were available to them. Second, were those for whom, the danger did not seem all that real. We might call this the "experts in danger" syndrome - a class of people made up of individuals who have met dangers before and whom, consider themselves experts at overcoming those challenges. It is the expert swimmer who goes out too far in rough waters;

the skier who drives in whiteout conditions; and the shoreline resident who has waited out strong storms in the past. For these individuals the perceived danger does not reach a sufficient level of threat and they stand their ground.

There are times when fight should become flee. Experts in danger are sometimes the last to recognize this fact and the consequences can be disastrous.

Third, there is that group of people who wanted to leave but who lacked the resources. Either no money or transportation was available or the existing opportunities were unaffordable. Relocating for some of those on the 29th might eat up a month, possibly more income in the relocation and return home. Many could not spare these funds. And, finally, there were those too ill or too old to move without substantial physical assistance. Were these people deliberately neglected, as some media sources would wonder? Or worse, was no thought given to them at all. Could they somehow have been invisible to the planners? Such did seem to be the case as the days wore on. Yet the author of this paper believes that deliberate neglect was not to blame. Rather, a systems level communication breakdown, both human and technological, accounted for the overall calamity of Katrina.

KATRINA AND COMMUNICATION BREAKDOWN

It is not uncommon for writers to pose that catastrophic events are not the cause of any one single thing going wrong, but rather a tragic series of them. Most everything, concerning communication that could have gone wrong during Katrina did. Noted earlier, communication analysts look for patterns of behavior. Typically, in any given crisis a credible, knowledgeable, calm, articulate spokesperson (think NTSB) takes charge of the event and notes:

what has occurred is rare, we are not wholly sure what has happened, we are gathering information even as we speak, all information will be released as available and appropriate, we have taken every measure to lessen the likelihood of a similar event now or in the future, here are pictures and stories of the help being provided, and (finally), the situation has been stabilized.

This general pattern emerges whether the crisis has to do with product tampering, vehicle recalls; man made or natural disasters of any kind. It is predictable, appropriate, and most of all important. As a communication strategy it puts a rhetorical frame on the situation, making it manageable; the very kind of frame not in place when Katrina struck. Human and technological systems were simply overwhelmed.

Katrina knocked out the phones. Power outages meant no TV and no radio without batteries. Damaged towers meant no cell service. Local radio stations were down. EAS was less than effective - where were people told to go, when were they told, what physical systems were in place to help relocate them, and why did subsequent news stories never address this failure? People could not call out for help and rescue teams could not call in. The event was too large in scope for the current level of planning. Who's in charge, what priorities are in effect, how long will this take, what's necessary? All these questions lay at the heart of the communication overload accompanying Katrina. One witness observed that rescue personnel were reduced to 18th century-like forms of communication with runners carrying information to and from the scene of "battle".

THE NATIONAL MEDIA

Compounding the communication problems in the summer of 2005 was the loss of three of the most trusted American newsmen. Peter Jennings, Tom Brockaw, and Dan Rather, were all in the anchor seat during 9/11 and each did an extraordinary job of guiding viewers during this difficult time. Each was well seasoned and at the helm in September of 2001 but gone when Katrina arrived. Competent as their replacements might be, they could not have carried the same weight as these three men.

As news teams struggled to address the situation they had to negotiate a complex communication environment fraught with difficulties and one which differed from the familiar patterns of the past. No one could say, "We're not wholly sure what's happened," because every news source and viewer did know. Watching TV the enormity of the storm was revealed and engineers lined up to testify to the expected magnitude of the event if the

levees didn't hold. This hurricane was freakish in size and scope. Putting a manageable frame around it would require the highest level of skill and experience. Information, at the start, was sketchy at best; little help, if any, was apparent; and the visuals showed only destruction and despair. Comforting "here's the help" footage would be a long time coming. Instead, day after day cries of "we need help" were witnessed. This situation was anything but stable.

Among the best known reporters covering the event were Geraldo Reviera and Shephard Smith. Speaking with Bill O'Reilly, Riviera and Smith worked to bring home the emotional impact of the aftermath. Riviera at the Superdome: "Look at this baby. I have a baby. Let these people leave, let them walk. . ." Shephard Smith, "I've been saying it for days, I 10, Exit 235, where is the help." O'Reilly counsels "let's get some perspective here," and, in a rare moment on his show, Smith and Shephard rebuke him saying, "this is the perspective, we're right here, we know." The experience of Katrina looked very different on the ground than in the studio. Rivera and Smith revealed emotional intelligence in their courageous coverage and put their careers in jeopardy by doing so. Every reporter knows the story of the Hindenburgh and the emotional telling of the story that lost the reporter his job.

WHAT PUBLIC RELATIONS TEACHES

A great deal has been written in the Public Relations literature concerning communication and crisis management. Some writers believe that it is not possible to plan for every contingency (Stanton, 2002) and one author titles his work: "Crisis communication; if it had a precedent, it wouldn't be a crisis" (Tortorella, 1989). The majority, however, rightly suggest that planning is not only possible, but essential. Malozzi (1994) contends that every crisis has four phases "1) crisis preparedness; 2) the initial response; 3) maintaining ongoing corrective actions until the crisis has run its course; and 4) evaluation and follow-up." Gilman (2002) suggests that managing communication means managing information flow, and that the process involves: "(1) identifying the key groups that will potentially be affected by the event, (2) selecting spokespeople; and (3) managing the timing and distribution of information."

Having a protocol in place and preparing in advance is a theme that repeats again and again in the writings of forward looking authors. Rene Henry former chair of the Public Relation's Society of America rose to the number one spot on Amazon.com with his book: You'd better have a hose if you want to put out a fire. Henry observes: "The companies, organizations, and institutions most vulnerable to a crisis are those whose managers believe they are immune. And, most management teams are either unprepared or under-prepared to deal with a crisis (2002)." In his work on the Red River Valley flood Seeger points out "the need for an approach to crisis communication that moves beyond the traditional models of image restoration. Viewing crisis as an ongoing process of discovery and renewal is more fitting for a crisis that extends beyond questions of image (2001)." David Hall, in his extensive review of the crisis communication literature agrees noting:

The crisis communication literature today overwhelmingly takes a public relations perspective. Crisis communication with the public is critically important and warrants the attention it has received in the literature. However, as conveyed by the models presented here, public relations represents only a subset of the communication activities necessary during crisis response. The public relations literature focuses predominantly on one communication step (dissemination) and one stakeholder group (the public). The results of this study suggests that other essential crisis response communication steps (observation, interpretation, and choice) must be performed as precursors to dissemination and will influence the ability of an organization to rapidly end the response phase and end the risk of immediate damage.

Several things become apparent in the Public Relation studies. (1) with an estimated 6,000 "newsworthy organizational crisis events reported annually," managers stand a strong likelihood of being tested; (2) advanced planning is a must, and (3) there is a specific need for a crisis communication model that is organized around a rhetorical protocol. While the majority of PR writing discusses phases in the evolution and resolution of crises, these writers do not specifically provide a rhetorically based, systems level model for communication during a crisis. Learning from Katrina, this paper fills the gap.

GENERAL LESSONS FROM KATRINA

Generally there are things we know now, that perhaps, we did not know then. First is the need for CERT - communication emergency response teams. Such teams should have the latest technology - satellite phones and computers, and be guided by a protocol establishing, without question, who is in charge concerning which matters and when the decisions of each person might be overridden by someone of higher authority. In any crisis seconds matter. It is a given that medical triage needs to be in place, but it is also essential that medical plans be coupled with the political and communication arrangements which give them their greatest chance for success.

Second, Katrina taught the importance of providing communication in a coordinated, timely, and consistent manner. Could not flyers, if nothing else, have been dropped to those standing on I 10 promising when comfort and aid would be forthcoming. Could nothing have been done to let these people know they were not forgotten?

And third, we learned, or learned again, the importance of combining communication with security so that first responders are not put in danger. When the military arrived we saw the kind of accomplishment that can be coordinated when security and communication systems are simultaneously in place. All of this we have learned generally, what remains is what we has been learned specifically through this study of Katrina.

R.E.S.P.O.N.D: KATRINA'S MOST IMPORTANT LESSON

At the start of this paper it was noted that rhetoric concerns the effective use of language in speech or writing. Additionally it was observed that communication can be guided by principles of rhetoric much like medicine and law are governed by the protocols associated with those fields. Law speaks of the three Ps: proof, procedures, and pleadings. Medicine is sometimes driven by anacronyms like: ABC.

What follows is an original, rhetorically guided model of crisis communication drawn from close study of Katrina and her aftermath. Arguably the model presented below might be used to address any potential crisis situation real, or imagined:

Step One:	**R**ealize Possibilities
Step Two:	**E**valuate Consequences
Step Three:	**S**pecify What Needs To Be Done
Step Four:	**P**lan Systemically
Step Five:	**O**ptimize Information Flow
Step Six:	**N**ever Wait to Communicate
Step Seven:	**D**etermine Plans for Future Crisis

While all these steps are important, step one might be the most important of all. It is difficult to respond to something that has never been considered as a possibility. For individuals this may involve considerations of catastrophic illness or job loss. Companies need to envision competitors, economic shifts, changes in delivery systems brought about by the internet, consumer lawsuits, threats of many kinds. And countries, particularly in the post 9/11 world need to consider the possibility of attack on person or property and the potential threats do not stop there. Among other considerations are: illegal immigration, crime, natural disaster, aging transportation systems, computer system assaults, and war to name just a few.

Step two asks that we examine any potential crisis from a systems perspective. What are all the consequences that might be foreseen? If the primary earner in a family becomes ill who is additionally affected - children, spouse, dependent and aging parents? Should a massive recall be necessary how might this be accomplished without demise of the organization? How many vendors will be affected? How many consumers? Will cuts in jobs be necessary to cover costs? If a country must go to war does it have the necessary resources in terms of equipment, technology, and personnel? What effect will such an initiative have on the economy? On security? When taxes are raised is there a concomitant rise in bankruptcy? Should the Fed raise or lower interest rates? If a major earthquake occurred in California would there enough blood in the banks to treat the injured? All of these are systems level

questions. If every shape in the Kaleidoscope formation is not consider there will be some area of the crisis where non response could be the order of the day.

In step three we take measure of what specifically needs to be done in the event that possibility becomes reality. Specifically should a company settle lawsuits or fight them? Should a nation make military investments primarily in air, sea, or ground support? Should a wall be built to the north or south? What specifically does a person, company or nation need to do should its worst fears be realized? In step three these questions are answered no matter how daunting they may first appear to be.

Step four cautions that we must remember that any change in a system most always result in a change in the other part of the system. If an individual takes out long term disability insurance but never needs it, that money might have been spent elsewhere or invested. If s/he works two jobs for extra income, fatigue could make family and job relationships suffer. If a company does not maintain its reputation it can have losses both domestic and global. If a country deploys its National Guard in one capacity, it may not be available for deployment in another. It is essential that crisis plans be made with systems theory in mind.

In step five every consideration is given to the optimization of information flow. Who needs to know what and when? Who needs to be the primary spokesperson for the issues at each level. If technology fails what back up systems are in place? If an EAS broadcast goes out has the specific wording and timing of the announcement been considered? What barriers exist to understanding? Any crisis management plan is only as good as the ability to disseminate information quickly, accurately, and effectively.

Step six requires that those managing a crisis never wait to communicate. As David Eisenberg (1991) notes: "Instant action is required. In all crisis management plans time is the key." Communication, particularly during a critical event, both creates and resolves expectations. People need to hear words of guidance, support, and comfort. They need to know that someone is in charge and that they are not alone. In the absence of communication people will make up their own, possibly dangerous, understanding of events. The best way to quell damaging rumors and possible panic is by giving out accurate, trustworthy information. Putting people in touch with credible expert opinion, as quickly as possible, is of paramount importance.

Finally, is the importance of discussing plans for the future. Anything that has been learned from a current crisis must be fed back in for future consideration. What, for example, is known about future threats now that the current crisis has passed? How can we better manage the event the next time it occurs? What differences might present themselves? Thinking of **R.E.S.P.O.N.D**. as a communication loop requiring constant feedback, allows for the possibility of continual improvements. Any crisis that happens once, can happen again, and each time something might be learned as has been the case with Katrina.

REFERENCES

1. Amazon.com Gives No. 1 Ranking to Crisis Communication Book Authored by PRSA's Chair Elect -- College of Fellows Rene A. Henry, APR. (2000). *Business Wire.* Retrieved 11/14/06 from www.highbeamresearch.com
2. Eisenberg, David. (1991). Communication Can Lessen Impact of Crisis: J&J Set the Standard on How to React. *Chain Drug Review.* Retrieved 11/14/06 from www.highbeamresearch.com.
3. Gilman, Andrew (2002). Communications Coordination. *Risk Management.* Retrieved 11/22/06 from www.highbeamresearch.com.
4. Hale, David P. (2005). Crisis Communication Challenges: building theory from qualitative data. *Journal of Business Communication.* Retrieved 11/14/06 from www.highbeamresearch.com.
5. Katz, Daniel; Kahn, Robert L. (1966). *The social psychology of organizations.* New York: John Wiley and Sons.
6. Mallozzi, Cos. (1994) Facing the Danger Zone in Crisis Communication. *Risk Management.* Retrieved 11/14/06 from www.highbeamresearch.com.

7. Millar and Irvine (1966) in Snider, Michelle (1988) The Compatibility of Corrective Action in Organizational Crisis Communication. *Communication Quarterly.* Retrieved 11/14/06 from www.highbeamresearch.com.
8. Seeger, Matthew. (2001). Exploring the Boundaries of Crisis Communication: the case of the 1997 red river valley flood. *Communication Studies.* Retrieved 11/14/06 from www.highbeamresearch.com.
9. Smith, Donald (1993). Mere Law, Mere Medicine, Mere Rhetoric. *ECA News.* Spring, 5.
10. Stanton, Peter V. (2002). Ten Communication Mistakes You Can Avoid When Managing a Crisis. *Public Relations Quarterly*. Retrieved 11/14/06 from www.highbeamresearch.com.
11. Tororella, Albert J. (1989). *Communication World.* Retrieved 11/14/06 from www.highbeamresearch.com.
12. Tubbs, Stewart. (2007). *A Systems Approach to Small Group Interaction.* New York: McGraw-Hill.
13. Watzlawick, Paul. (1977). *How Real is Real?* Vintage.
14. Williams, Jack. (2005). History of Category Five Hurricanes. Retrieved 11/22/06. www.usatoday.com/weather/whcat5.htm

NOTES