A STUDY OF THE CRISIS IMAGE IN THE TECHNOLOGICAL AND INFORMATIONAL SOCIETY

Marius PETRESCU[1]

Rezumat. *Deosebit de importantă pentru orice organizaţie, analiza crizei de imagine presupune acţiuni şi strategii viabile de gestionare a crizei şi de reducere, pe cât posibil, a consecinţelor ei negative. Managementul crizei are loc în toate etapele de derulare a acesteia şi se rezumă în: identificarea şi evaluarea cauzelor producerii crizei; studierea atentă a fiecărei faze (perioade) şi stabilirea concluziilor cu privire la rolul şi implicarea actorilor; analiza rezultatelor acţiunii mijloacelor de comunicare în masă, a modificărilor produse de criză. Drept finalitate a acestei comunicări, apreciem că elaborarea unei Strategii de combatere a atacurilor la adresa imaginii ţării în societatea informaţională este o necesitate indiscutabilă.*

Abstract. *Extremely important for any organization, the study of the image crisis requires viable actions and strategies for the crisis management and for the decrease in as much as possible of its negative consequences. The crisis management occurs in all its stages of development and consists in: identification and assessment of the causes leading to the generation of the crisis; careful analysis of each stage and definition of the conclusions regarding the role and implication of the actors; study of the results of the mass media action and of the modifications generated by the crisis. As a finality of this communication we consider that the drawing up of a Strategy for counteracting the attacks to the image of our country in the informational society is a must.*

Key words: globalization, crisis, image, information, contradiction, communication

1. Identification and assessment of the stages (phases) of the crisis

The study of the image crisis implies a number of activities which make possible pertinent conclusions and viable management strategies. The main elements of the study are:

a) identification and assessment of the stages (phases) of the crisis;

b) careful study of each stage (phase) and drawing of conclusions regarding:

- the role of the main events;
- the actors' involvement;
- the role and implication of the structures;
- the role and consequences of the differences;
- the role and consequences of the oppositions and contradictions;

c) study of the role and involvement of the media;

d) study of the crisis consequences:

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[1] Professor Ph. D., Faculty of Economic Sciences of *Valahia* University, Târgovişte,

- identification of the changes brought about by crisis and the meaning of the changes;
- identification of the perspectives opened/closed by the crisis.

The stages (phases) of the crisis are revealed during the generation of the factors determining the crisis and during its development within the materialization space. The stages of the crisis can take place successively, stage after stage, or almost concomitantly, if the crisis id an explosive one and its materialization time is very short.

The main stages of the image crisis are:
  a) the stage preceding the crisis;
  b) the starting of the crisis;
  c) the crisis in itself;
  d) the stage after the crisis (post-crisis);
  e) the present situation – the moment the crisis is studied.

The stage preceding the crisis is harder to establish. It is difficult to accurately identify when this stage began, but one can more precisely identify its closing stage. The symptoms of its coming to an end appear the moment the crisis is openly accepted by all the members of the organization. The actors of the crisis (the employees) perceive the signals preceding the crisis only they think about the past in the light of the present crisis. When the crisis is identified, the study of the preceding stage is done through a process of back thinking that considers:

- identification of the main events significant for the image of the organization;
- description of these events from the image perspective;
- identification of the events from the near past of the organization, connected between them, which could be the causes for the present events and which come one after the other (the causal chain of events).

The starting of the crisis may take various forms. Usually, the starting of a crisis is related to a precise event, although not always the same for all the members of an organization. This event – internal or external – is always perceived as being the obvious sign of a change in the equilibrium of the power relations between the dominant pole (organization as authorized information distributor and as information owner) and the dominant pole (the public as information receiver and image generator) in the organization. The event that marks the starting of the crisis is usually connected with two essential aspects: the change of the dominant pole and the interference of external instances.

The change within the dominant pole is clearly seen when the communication aspect registers notable changes such as: the deterioration of the organization's position as a truthful and reliable point of information, or shadowing it by point of

information external to the organization; the change of dominant pole's speech (the speech becomes more aggressive, lapidary, justificatory and legitimate); the change of dominant pole's practice (strictly official information made by the organization's leader, the spokesman, restriction of the access to information, diminish of direct contacts with the members of the organization); decrease of the organization's visibility in public communication field (decrease of the news number in mass-media, decrease of participation in public manifestations).

The involvement of external instances (*mass media* as organization, competitive organizations, opinion leaders, the elements of the task-environment) are especially materialized in official and unofficial control activities of organization's communication, in public manifestation of critical assessments, in redirecting the messages and the public interest, in orientating the perceptions and attitudes, in imposing the themes for public debates; as well as of the meanings and significations of the events perceived in public environment, with clear consequences within the organization. Taking into consideration the change and reorientation of internal informational flows by the increase of the number of internal informal opinion leaders and of unofficial information channels, rumors proliferation, increase of information leaking, loss of control on the information, the decrease of the credibility of official information sources and of circulated information, changing of internal communication themes and messages structure and extra-organizational communication.

The releaser of the crisis is very important in its evolution. This determines the gradual or sudden deterioration of the organization's credibility, questioning its elements of identity. The releaser may be evident or diffused and, depending on its nature it determines the evolution of the crisis. If the releaser is a particularly negative event, it will imprint an explosive, accelerated evolution to the crisis. If the releaser is diffused, the state of the crisis is latent, less evident, being even unobserved by many of the organization members.

The releaser is the distinct mark of an antagonism that inaugurates the disturbance that points the beginning of the crisis. It generates discrepancies of the significances related to organizational values (seriousness, professionalism, organization, efficiency, etc.) it determines the emergence of negative representations and focuses on certain elements of organization which become more visible and more distinct. In order to identify the releaser, it must be analyzed, defined and then described. Although it is very important in the evolution of the crisis, **the releaser must not be identified with the crisis itself**.

The crisis in itself has multiple manifestations; therefore its analysis is a complex and risky enterprise. In order to cover the entire manifestation of the crisis and its various consequences, the crisis study shall highlight aspects referring to:

- the notoriety and visibility of the organization;
- the evolution of credible organizational activities;
- the level of trustworthiness of the organization in the social environment;
- the level of consolidation of the organization's identity;
- the organization's degree of acceptance in getting the public willingness;
- market success (the level of reaching the strategic objectives);
- the control of the information in and out of the organization;
- the control regarding the decisions on the preservation and proliferation of the organization; the severe manifestations in internal and external public behavior when one becomes aware of the image crisis;
- the manifestation of severe contradictions and breakings generalization in the promotion and acceptance of organizational values.

The end of this stage is marked by the emergence of a decision which assesses the entire situation, a decision that is the key-event having notable consequences for stopping the crisis.

Other important elements necessary for the crisis itself are:
- the evaluation of the crisis period between the releasable event and the assessment of the decision that ends the crisis;
- the identification of highly important points (events) of the crisis by their defining, describing and timing;
- the identification of minimum points of the crisis by their defining, describing and timing;
- the description of the emergence of positive perceptions and positively changes of attitude towards the organization as a sign of crisis ending;
- the establishment of the scope (extent) of the crisis by identifying the contaminated areas (the crisis could contaminate certain areas; could contaminate the entire organization; could contaminate structures that have a dominant function, with comprehensive effects; it could contaminate the management – top management crisis).

The post-crisis stage could be identified by two criteria: a) the members of the organization declare the end of the crisis, admitting the improvement of the organization image and regain of the public trust. The organization resumes its normal activity, it preserves and consolidates its identity, it re-establishes internal and external informational flows; b) the assessment of total degradation of the organization's image, of the products and services, the organization's disruption and the need to create a new identity by: the emergence of a new legitimacy; the emergence of new structures and identity elements of the new organization; the restoration of the power relations; the restructure of the dominant pole and its functioning according to the new principles; a new speech of the dominant pole

which gathers the acceptance of the organization's members and of relevant public categories.

2. The role of the events, the involvement of the actors, the role of the structures, oppositions and contradictions

The study, from this perspective, has to establish the role of each crisis component, the degree of active and context elements' involvement, the action or non-action consequences, the local, zonal or general manifestations of the social environment where the organization functions.

The study of the events implies their inventory and hierarchy depending on their importance and consequences. Moreover, it is necessary to establish the relation between the events from the perspective of their immediate and subsequent influence on the image components or of the image in itself. The events, in their successive development, influence each other, not necessarily according to the cause effect pattern, intensifying or deteriorating their consequences in modalities dependent on the context, on the people's interests and convictions, on the intra and inter-organizational relation system, on the reports of the events, the quality of the communication channels, on the number and signification of the communication barriers.

The actor's involvement (organizations, institutions, opinion leaders, personalities) is fundamental for the study of the crisis. The determination of the involvement degree must reveal the actors directly involved, actors engaged ever since the beginning of the crisis and actors engaged during the various stages of the crisis.

The actors' role during the crisis can be determined if one identifies those actors who initiated the crisis, who aggravated it, who accelerated or led to the chronicity of the crisis, those actors who solved the crisis (who took the key-decision in solving the crisis), leading and secondary actors of the crisis, actors who had to involve themselves and did not (why? and the consequences of non-involvement), the declared objectives of the actors, their hidden objectives, the differences between the actors' declared objectives and their actions.

A pertinent study must reflect the actors' informational position (what they know and what they do not know, what they pretend to know and they do not know, the channels through which they are informed), what they deliberately hide, what is their psychological state of mind (their psychoses: fear, panic, carelessness, resignation etc.), of what potential actions they are capable of (sacrifice, violence, constructive rational and irrational actions, absence, consolation etc.), what facts, information, actions they are sensitive to (what is the threat encountered by the actors), what is their reaction capability, to what level they were affected (immediate affected groups, groups that lost the most, groups that gained the

most, indirectly affected groups, directly affected groups, but with delay, non-affected groups). Careful attention should be given to establishing the actors' role in the context. One takes into consideration the neighboring factors (spectators), institutionalized actors (internal and international organizations interested in the analyzed crisis), media actors (internal and international mass-media, specific information systems), and actors within the interpretation area (political, economic, ideological and scientific interpretation). The mediators are, as a rule, important actors. The study on the mediators must reveal their origin (whether they belong or not to the organization), their interests in the organization, in certain events, their direct or indirect involvement, their declared and hidden objectives, the undertaking by *mass media* of the role of mediator.

The role and the involvement of structures are crucial for the study of the crisis. It is important to know the structures where the crisis emerged, the contamination itinerary, the contaminated structures, the structures divided by the crisis; those transformed or disestablished the new emerged structures and their role in defining the organizational identity. The study is possible if, ever since the beginning, there is an inventory of all the organization's structures and the main changes appeared in each stage of the crisis are tracked, especially in those structures that play a defining part in establishing the organization's identity (e.g. the transportation structure within an air, railway, road company).

The role and consequences of the differences in the study of the crisis are evident. In this situation, the differences amplify and take an unforeseeable trajectory. As regards the functioning of the organization, the main differences that influence the organization's image are: differences of status, of role, of salary, of living standard, of power and decision. These can turn themselves into oppositions which can become irreconcilable, especially when they are submitted to public debate. Consequently, the study must reveal the dominant differences, differences accepted and unaccepted in the organization, the formal differences, (established hierarchically by norms and laws), the informal differences (established artificially by advantages and abuses), the pathological differences (obviously, abnormal, disproportionate and eccentric), the evolution of the main differences and their possible consequences. To these one can add the deficiencies of the internal information, the differences regarding the organization members' access to specific information and/or to public information, the blocking of vertical or horizontal informational flows. Maximum consideration will be given to the possible irreconcilable differences: the higher and higher differences between the ever increasing management's salaries and the continually decreasing workers' salaries based on the employment dismissal; the ever higher differences between the management's decisional power becoming discretionary and abusive, and the employers' lack of decision that helplessly assist to their own interests' deterioration.

This analysis must, firstly, identify those differences that may have a hazardous evolution and that can rapidly turn into opposition. One refers in particular to those differences envisaging a great number of employees and whose actions can be determined during the crisis. The differences between the organization and the elements of the extra-organizational environment are important for the perception and representations on the organization. Consequently, the following differences must be considered: the place and the different role of the organizations within the hierarchy of the organizations of the same kind; the different place taken by the organizations in the public's assessment, evaluation and preferences (in the manifestation of the trust, choice, etc.); differences regarding the interpretation perspective and the professional level of the organizations, differences between the public's expectancy perspectives and the organizational offer; differences regarding the access to information, decision, resources and public; differences of interests of the organizations etc.

The role and consequences of the oppositions and of the contradictions during the crisis reveal the dynamics elements and its representations. The oppositions and contradictions perceived by the members of the organization produce negative representations and images that determine intensely expressed opinions, attitudes oriented toward people and structures that become undesirable, actions that often cannot be kept under control. The oppositions and contradictions, as a reason of people's actions express the destructive side of the crisis directed toward the elements of power and identity of the organization.

The analysis will lead to identifying the main oppositions in the organization and outside the organization, the actors of the opposition, their consequences during the crisis and afterwards. At the same time, the analysis will have to establish the oppositions that develop within the limits of the norms in force (normal oppositions), oppositions that violate the norms (abnormal oppositions), and oppositions benefic for the organization and those considered pathological, the evolution of the oppositions and their consequences. The analysis of the contradictions will identify their dominant role in escalating all types of conflicts that are revealed during the crisis. In order to do this, one has to identify the main contradictions, their actors, their consequences during the crisis and their consequences in the aftermath of the crisis. Moreover, the careful analysis will reveal the main contradictions, the secondary contradictions, the turning of the secondary contradictions into main ones and vice versa, the factors that determined the emergence and the development of the main contradictions.

The analysis of mass media's role and involvement in the crisis is not easy. In order to do this, it is necessary to systematically monitor the press, to identify all the information circulated about the organization during the crisis, the study of the way the press reported the main moments of the crisis, the way it rendered the

information transmitted from the crisis decisional and management centers as well as the information transmitted by the opinion leaders. At the same time, it is important to establish the favorable or unfavorable background created by the media, positive/negative images induced by it, the envisaged target-public and, if case be, all types of manipulations and their consequences.

Conclusions

Ever since the beginning a solid analysis must be carried out on *two main coordinates*:

a) identification of the changes imposed by the crisis and sense of these changes;
b) identification of the opened/closed perspectives by the crisis.

The first coordinate requires for the identification of the main, essential, changes in all the organization's elements and activities and of the secondary ones, less important, their positive or negative role being evaluated during the whole crisis. It will also reveal the long and short term consequences of the crisis by analyzing their benefic or malefic character on the management and on employers as well as on the structures' functionality, on the organization's labor, management and power relations.

The second coordinate will analyze the development, preservation and increase perspectives, opened or closed, by the organization's crisis. The perspectives opened by the crisis will be used to develop and consolidate the organization under the new existence conditions, while the perspectives closed by the crisis will be studied so as to avoid some mistakes in the drawing up of the subsequent development strategies.

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