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A study about internal crisis communication strategies in Swedish private and public companies

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ABSTRACT

Crisis communication has never been more important as in last years. Nevertheless, its focus both in practice and in theory was majorly directed towards the external component. On the other hand this study wishes to contribute and enhance the visibility and importance of internal crisis communication. This is a comparative study that involves interviews with communication professionals both from public and private companies in Sweden.

The focus is directed towards answering study's research question *how internal crisis communication strategies are used in private and public companies?* In order to answer this question inductive approach is used and data collected through the use of interview is analysed by the means of grounded theory. Later on the data was compared with most relevant crisis communication theories and existing strategies only to yield most dominant practices and blueprints both in theory and in practice. Study's results point towards traditional understanding of crisis but rather alternative practical approaches to manage crisis internally. Findings also reveal almost unified character of crisis communication with tendency of internal communication becoming same as external. Furthermore, the impact of organisational culture on internal crisis communication should not be neglected as it is a part of study's findings.

From more theoretical point of view findings suggest the concept of enacted sensemaking in crisis situations to be inseparable from those traditional understandings of crisis and most relevant when it comes to crisis management.

Keywords: *Internal Crisis Communication, Crisis, Crisis Communication, Internal Communication, Internal Crisis Communication Strategies, Sensemaking*

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Internal Crisis Communication - Crash Course

The world we live in continuously faces new crisis. Just when one might think that the worst is behind somewhere else new crisis arises. It is almost as we live in one everlasting global crisis, day by day. Types, durations, consequences of these crises vary from local to global, from force majeure to man caused, from catastrophic to empowering. An image of a innocent dark skinned boy dressed in white dress, crowned with candles strongly implying towards Swedish traditional Lucia holiday and used by one Swedish private company last December (2016) caused an unseen avalanche of both negative and positive comments and reactions in Sweden. This lead to company's serious communication crisis and campaign's termination. This and thousands of other examples justify the fact that crisis can occur anywhere and anytime and it is of utmost importance for companies to be prepared and anticipate such one occurring.

Often when communicating in crisis organization's communication may seem to be addressed towards the general public only via most commonly used channels namely media and press releases. But external crisis communication should not prevent the company's management to actively engage in communication with their employees, the one that Kathleen Fearn-Banks in her book *Crisis Communication – A Casebook Approach* refers to as *functional public* (2002). Functional public is the the focus of internal crisis communication. To actively engage in communication with the functional public especially during the times of crisis means to generate closer identification of employees with company's values and

goals, proactively prevent misunderstanding, panic etc. and the methodology used while collecting the empirical data. The quality and quantity of communication, in fact, affect the level of trust and involvement of employees (Thomas et al., 2009). This is of utmost importance in times of crises. Hence, need to continue researching this uncharted territory remains significant.

1.2. Internal Communication Matters

For a long time the importance of internal communication was overshadowed by its big external (communication) brother. But if one scratches under the surface one will immediately see that internal communication is directly linked to the sole foundation of any company, its employees. In layman's words this quote by late Bill Shankly vividly reflects on this, *'Some people believe internal communication is a matter of life and death, I am very disappointed with that attitude. I can assure you it is much, much more important than that.'*

Previous research has established significant influence of internal communication towards employees engagement. When internal communication is effective and successful the employee related outcome will be evident in increased productivity, decreased attrition, enhanced image and reputation of an organisation they are working for and ultimately additional financial profits (Schaufeli, Salanova, González-Romá, & Bakker, 2002). Hence, organizations which devote time, effort and financial resources to internal communication can for sure profit from employees, staff, volunteers who are committed to organisational culture. Positive outputs can be identified in organisational capacity and profitability.

According to Friedl & Vercic internal communication has two main roles: spanning provision of information and creating of a sense of community within organizations (2011). Internal communication is not limited to employees only but goes beyond that and treats

communication situations where the employees communicate among each other or even when they interpret and make sense of the organization's "external crisis communication (Frandsen and Johansen 2011). Internal communication is the pedal that helps to prevent crisis, create positive reactions, minimize damage and eventually produces positive results (Mazzei and Ravazzani 2013.)

1.3. Defining internal communication and communication strategy

According to European Communication Monitor, European Association of Communication Directors and Communication Director Magazine two of disciplines or fields of practice will gain importance in the future, namely internal communication and crisis communication. Out of 1087 communication professionals from 22 countries answering the questions *What the fields of practice are important in your company and will they gain more or less importance in the future?* 34 percent answered internal communication and 69 percent of them expecting for internal communication to gain importance (Zerfas et al., 2007). Additionally, communication practitioners perceive internal communication as a challenging area (Fitz & Partick 2004, Welch & Jackson, 2005), which significantly affects the ability of an organization to involve the employees into the environmental changes and understanding its evolving objectives (Welch & Jackson, 2005). It is interesting to see that internal communication, being such a young academic field has already generated several different definitions. Hence Frank & Brownell are defining it as "*the communication transactions between individuals and/or groups at various levels and in different areas of specialisation that are intended to design and redesign organisations, to implement designs, and to co-ordinate day-to-day activities*" (1989) while Cheney and Christensen simply relate to internal communication as "*employee relations, statements of mission and organizational*

development” (2001). Furthermore, Welch and Jackson define internal communication as “*communication between an organization’s strategic managers and its internal stakeholders, designated to promote commitment to the organization, a sense of belonging to it, awareness of its changing environment and understanding of its evolving aims.*” (2007). This last one seems to be most applicable for the purpose of this study since employees are the ones who can affect or are affected by the achievement of the firm’s objectives (Freeman, 1984). In order to simplify within this study we recognize employees as internal stakeholders and the communication among them self, or across different hierarchies sharing the same context and communication channels as internal communication.

Having in mind the inductive character of this study we will not try to present a plethora of communication strategy definitions but narrow down to single one used by Joseph Corneliessen. He defines communication strategy as *the general set of communication objectives and related communication programs or tactics chosen by an organization in order to support the corporate strategy in the organization* (Corneliessen, 2011). By narrowing down the number of definitions used and by choosing the definition that is far-reaching intention is to create perfect match between study’s “inductiveness” and the unforeseen diversity of results that may emerge from this study.

1.4. Purpose and research question

This study aims to explore one of communication’s youngest academic research fields, internal crisis communication. It uses the existing theoretical framework to explain practical understanding of crisis, practices and internal communication strategies that come as a result of that understanding. The research question investigates *how internal crisis communication*

strategies are used in private and public companies? and seeks to outline those most prominent ones and their manifestations.

1.5. Delimitations

This study is an inductive qualitative study of Swedish private and public companies and no particular crisis has been used in order to generate specific outcomes. Different cases and crisis experiences are subject to analysis of this study and no general conclusions in a speculative sense are to be drawn on the base of analysed data. Study's spot light lies at identifying of practical communication routines, protocols, strategies, behaviours etc. manifested in crisis stricken companies that are matter of analysis to this study. Additionally, the qualitative feature of this study can exhibit further limitation to result interpretation since its qualitative aspect is unable to cover every communication pattern. Again, study's qualitative characteristic goes along with a certain dose of subjectivity attached to it. Therefore, no generalization are supposed to be made in relation to the results of this study, but instead the focus lies on identifying how companies communicate with their with their employees in crisis situation, what strategies they use.

1.6. Disposition

The study is structured in 6 different sections. The introduction chapter introduces the research field in focus and presents the thesis purpose and research question. Second chapter defines crisis and different traditions together with different internal crisis communication strategies. It is followed by research design, methodology and material.

The fourth chapter describes the technique and procedure of analysis and in Results & Discussion; the results from the empirical data are described, and discussed. Prior to

concluding remarks and recommendations for further research an analysis of results together with comparison with theoretical framework was presented.

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Some public relations-specific theories have been well applied to or developed for understanding the dynamic communication process and results in crisis situations, while some studies based their theoretical framework on broader theories originated from other related disciplines such as rhetoric, psychology, and sociology (Coombs and Holladay 2010). Nevertheless, crisis communication being a very young academic research discipline originates from *Excellence Theory in Public Relations* that was generated through a study of best practice in public relations lead by James E. Gruning (1992). This theory is a general theory of public relations that “*specifies how public relations makes organizations more effective, how it is organized and managed when it contributes most to organizational effectiveness, the conditions in organizations and their environments that make organizations more effective, and how the monetary value of public relations can be determined*” (Gruning 1992).

Today various theories are applied in crisis communication research. These include *Attribution theory* (Wise 2004), *Contingency theory* (Shin et al. 2005), *Organizational theory* (Christen 2005), *Image restoration theory* (Ulmer & Sellnow 2002) etc. Theoretical framework used in this particular study does not bear a deductive feature and as such should not be tested with any of findings to be presented later in the study. Theories given below are only to be compared with study’s findings in order to outline internal crisis communication strategies used in private and public companies in Sweden.

2.1. Internal crisis communication

For a very long time crisis communication was a synonym for external crisis communication focusing at press, media and general public as primary recipients. Moreover, internal crisis communication has not been viewed as a factor causing a crisis rather it is seen as a source of influencing employee than a source of engaging them in conversation for the attainment of understanding between management and employee (Kukule 2013).

This trend has shifted towards different stakeholders and propelled internal communication into researchers focus. A study conducted in 2011 among public and private organizations in Denmark shows how public companies appear to have less focus on internal crisis communication than private organizations. One of the study's results indicates that 77 percent of the studied public companies and 88 percent of the private companies, did have crisis plans including an internal dimension of crisis management (Frandsen and Johansen 2011). This is another aspect of this study that will be discussed further in the paper.

However, we still know only very little about what is going on inside an organization in crisis (Frandsen & Johansen, 2011). Apart from a few exceptions as for instance research studies in crisis sensemaking in continuation of Karl Weick's seminal article “Enacted sensemaking in crisis situations” (1988) there is a serious gap academic research implemented in this domain of crisis communication.

2.2. Crisis

Different traditions, theoretical approaches, academic subjects within crisis management have produced a surplus of different definitions and types of crises related to this particular field. This plentitude of definitions and types should not stipulate the lack of unanimity related to

crisis definition. This should not be observed as a problem. According to Rorty (1989) calls for definitions and consensus are misguided in the ambition to find a final vocabulary. But for the purpose of this study we will use one of the existing definitions.” *A crisis is a major occurrence with a potentially negative outcome affecting the organization, company, or industry, as well as its publics, products, services, or good name* (Fearn-Banks 2010)”.

For the same purpose we will use use classical categorization of crisis into community crisis and non-community crisis (Shaluf et al. 2003). Community crisis category encompasses both conflict and non-conflict situations where conflict situations are comprised out of internal conflicts that can be both individual (internal ethic conflict) or collective (strike). On the other hand non-conflict situations involve situations like economic and financial crisis. Non-community crisis covers a variety of accidents (Ibid).

Regardless of how many different definitions or types of crisis there might be in general we can differentiate between two understandings of crisis:

- 1) a narrow, information-oriented understanding
- 2) a broad, meaning-oriented understanding (Johansen and Frandsen 2007)

2.2.1. Narrow information-oriented understanding of crisis

First of all crisis here is observed as abnormality and the focus of fighting against this abnormality is laid at the acute stage of crisis as well as at external communication. When crisis strikes the only thing left to do is to react to it. This understanding is characterized by military like protocols and routines. Therefore it is common to come across well prepared crisis management plans followed by carefully worded press releases, large list of media contacts and drilled spokespersons (Gilpin and Murphy 2008).

2.2.2. Broad meaning-oriented understanding of crisis

Differently from narrow information-oriented understanding of crisis this understanding sees crisis as natural process in an ongoing natural evolution (Sellnow 1993, Kersten 2005). Again, totally different from previously mentioned understanding here focus is laid at all three stages of crisis with no particular highlighting of a single stage. There is no single document that should prepare employees and organizations to react and handle the crisis. Improvisation is highly present and practiced. Different stakeholders will have different interpretations. This goes for employees as well. Different employees (in rank, education, knowledge, experience, position) will differently understand crisis. It is clear that individual understandings of crisis prevail here and as such they can be easily linked to Weick's theory of retrospective sensemaking (Weick 1979, 1995, 2001, 2009). Weick claims that understanding crisis often intensifies the crisis (1988). Together with Sutcliffe he made significant contribution to these two understandings of crisis with their study of *collective mindfulness* in high reliability organizations (2001, 2007).

2.3. Approaches to crisis management

For the purpose of this study approaches to manage crisis will be classified in two categories: traditional approaches and those alternative ones. Traditional approaches can be observed through the prism of three stage model that reflects again most features present in both Fink's and Mitroff's approaches that are both descriptive and operational. They are descriptive since they are describing specific characteristics of different stages of crisis while their operational character comes from the focus on managing the crisis itself. These models are widely known and exercised. On the other hand less known but very often practically implemented are approaches of Karl Wick and Mazzei and Ravazzani that will be referred to as alternative in this study.

2.3.1. Traditional approaches to internal crisis communication

2.3.1.1. Basic three-stage model

“The three-stage model is not associated with any particular theorists, but it appears to have emerged from several research efforts as a general analytical framework” (Seeger, Sellnow, and Ulmer, 2003, 97). Coombs describes this most simple model through basic three steps that every communication practitioner should be aware of. Furthermore Coombs describes the three stages of the model – precrisis, crisis, and postcrisis – as macrostages that can be applied to many models of crisis management and adds that both Fink and Mitroff’s models fit into the general parameters of the three-stage model (Bodreaux 2005).

Precrisis - This particular crisis stage is related to crisis prevention and involves planning, appointment of crisis team and spokesperson and other preventive activities.

Crisis - This is the crisis manifestation part, the core of every model where actualization of previously set plans takes place. First of all this is the stage where crisis recognition occurs followed by careful wording of messages later to be sent to various kinds of publics. It is organization’s reputation that is at stake and activities related to its protection are accelerated and activated.

Postcrisis - Last stage of this model is focused at learning from crisis experience that just happened, making sure that crisis is over and that organization’s image in the eye of various publics is undisturbed and substantial.

It is Coombs himself who claims that Fink’s and Mitroff’s approaches (to be discussed in the following part of this study) to crisis management can be perfectly accommodated within these three aforementioned stages.

2.3.1.2. Fink's model

In order to describe crisis Fink uses disease metaphor that most closely reflects his four stages. This goes hand in hand with previously mentioned narrow information-oriented understanding of crisis. Organization's character and profile plays significant role in fighting the disease. Additionally, it is organization's preparedness that will decide the outcome of crisis.

Prodromal stage - Proactivity can be recognized as a keyword related to this stage. Organizations management are on the lookout after warning flames that can be traced in news articles, legislation, publications etc. in order to identify an approaching danger, crisis. Activities performed within this stage correlate with **precrisis** stage.

Acute stage - Crisis is introduced and its first impacts are tangible. The strengths and destructiveness of these impacts is highly dependent upon effectivity of proactive actions from prodromal stage. Fink argues that the actual crisis event begins with a trigger, during the acute stage (1986).

Chronic stage - If first impacts are felt in the previous stage those major ones take their full shape in this stage with effects that can span throughout the entire crisis life cycle. Chernobyl catastrophe took place in 1986 but even today one can trace its effects. Coombs (1999b) states that the acute and chronic stages act as sub-stages of the **crisis stage** of the three-stage model.

Resolution stage - Fink's final stage concentrates itself at analysis of what happened. It signals an end to crisis and restoration to original state. Nevertheless, no hurried conclusion related to the endpoint of chronic stage should be made since such would endanger organization with crisis resurgence. Resolution stage equates with postcrisis stage from basic three stage model

2.3.1.3. Mitroff's model

According to Mitroff regardless to the fact that every crisis possesses distinct and unique features, there is an underlying order and logic that can guide organizations regarding the various types of crises they should prepare for (1994). This order and logic is reflected through his five-stage model. If we go more in detail we will see that much of this logic can be traced both in basic three stage mode as well as in Fink's model. But let us start from stage number 1, **signal detection** - the best way to tackle the upcoming crisis is to look for its signals. As soon as these are identified one can start with the "*battle*".

2) **probing and prevention** - here organizations are looking for risk factors and trying to minimize the probability for them to harm. This phase is what Gonzalez-Herrero and Pratt (1996) identified as the opportunity for 'crisis killing'. Additionally, this phase along with signal detection stage can be equated with Fink's prodromal stage.

3) **damage containment** - here we see direct actions taken in order to fight the crisis. These actions can be a result of pre-planned activities or ad hoc activities emerged from crisis situation. This particular phase mirrors activities and steps taken both in Fink's acute stage and in basic three model's crisis stage.

4) **recovery**, the organizational members work to return to ordinary work routines

5) **learning**, the crisis is being reviewed and the management of it criticized, in order to do better next time. Perhaps most relevant difference between Fink's and Mitroff's model can be found in this last learning stage. Mitroff practically sees no end to crisis and observes it as a cycle in motion. In order to be better next time lessons originating from the last crisis need to be learned as quickly as possible. How fast and well company learns these lessons the better and more successful it will be able to tackle with some new upcoming crisis. Simply said, crisis is not there only to be described and explained crisis needs to be tackled and managed.

As previously mentioned all three models are descriptive in their essence since they are describing specific characteristics of different stages of crisis.

Table 2.3.1.3.

<i>Fink</i>	<i>Mitroff</i>	<i>Three-Stage</i>
Prodromal	Signal Detection	Pre-crisis
	Probing and Prevention	
Crisis Breakout	Damage Containment	Crisis
Chronic	Recovery	
Resolution	Learning	Post-crisis

Source: Coombs 2012:10

Comment: The table illustrates the similarities between Coomb's three-staged approach of crisis, using a division between the Pre-crisis, Crisis and Post-crisis stage, and Fink's four-staged perspective as well as Mitroff's five-staged model.

2.3.2. Alternative approaches to internal crisis communication

2.3.2.1 Enacted Sensemaking in Crisis Situations

Enacted sensemaking in its essence is a fusion of four different schools: self-fulfilling prophecies (Snyder 1984), commitment (Staw 1982), retrospective sensemaking (Weick 1979) and social information processing (Salancik and Pfeffer 1978). In order to prevent any crisis one needs to take an action, one needs to think. The sole of thinking process initiated by the crisis occurrence activates the passive knowledge i.e. knowledge previously gained and stored. This includes a lot of preexisting data concealed in existing protocols, plans, strategies. In addition to this thinking involves a lot of new, raw material that is crucial for sensemaking and that can strongly impact the outcome of any crisis. Just as actions are inseparable of any crisis so is the ambiguity that every crisis possesses. The bigger ambiguity of crisis the more present enactment sensemaking is there.

Individuals trying to prevent crisis get to understand the crisis more and more only after crisis is there, after actions taken to prevent crisis become inseparable from the crisis itself. Somewhat Machiavellian premise that situation determines appropriate action observed through this approach sounds wrong. Interpreted through enacted sensemaking this premise sounds: only after certain action is taken it is possible to see if it is an appropriate one. Therefore it is right to say that actions in crisis situations are strongly loaded with epistemological feature that shapes the entire sequence of crisis. The greater knowledge of organization's operations, processes, structure leads to more effective sensemaking i.e. more successful prevention of crisis. The enactment perspective is about both crisis prevention and crisis management (Weick 1988). Prevention and management ring already familiar sound of Mitroff's signal detection and probing, and prevention stages. Actions devoted to

sensemaking play a central role in the genesis of crisis and therefore need to be understood if we want to prevent and manage crises (Weick 1988). It is natural to expect that individual emerged in crisis emerges his actions as well. In relation to this we can see that all crises have an embedded enactment feature within. This feature becomes more obvious when the concepts of commitment, capacity and expectations are attributed to crisis conditions (Weick 1988).

Perhaps it is capacity out of these three features that plays most important role. Capacity can be translated as ability (individual ability comes from practical and theoretical expertise). The better capacity one possesses the wider spectrum of crisis perception one has on disposal in order to prevent crisis. Another aspect of capacity to be highlighted here is its dissemination through organisational hierarchy. Operators need to be able to take independent and creative action because they are closest to the system, yet centralization, tight coupling and prescribed steps prevent decentralized action (Perrow 1984). Authorities do not necessarily have the best and the largest knowledge and skills so having actions centralized in authority figures can lead to reduction of actions that are so crucial for process of sensemaking and successful crisis management.

Another interesting segment of crisis management is institutional memory. This segment is closely related to post-crisis stage. If this stage is carefully implemented institutional memory becomes richer through every crisis.

Finally, on a practical level of crisis management enactment is evident through psychology of control, effects of actions on stress level, speed of interactions and ideology.

2.3.2.2. Alternative internal crisis communication strategies

A relevant number of theorists and researchers find objectives (Myer et al. 1992, Myer et al., 2007) and contents (Aggerholm 2008; Balle 2008; Barrett 2002). of crucial importance for the definition of internal crisis communication strategies. Mazzei and Ravazzani use combination of these elements together with some findings from previous researches and studies in order to define internal crisis communication strategies (2015).

The model they present operates on three different: levels cognitive, affective and behavioral and as such can be classified into three different objectives: security, belonging and activating behaviors. Cognitive objectives tend to reduce uncertainty and increase realistic expectations among employees, thus enhancing a sense of security. Affective objectives are directed to increasing identification with and trust of the organization, thus creating a sense of belonging. Behavioral objectives aim to sustain employees' commitment in their roles and collaboration to overcome the crisis, thus activating behaviors (Mazzei and Ravazzani 2015).

The second previously mentioned element is the content. Just like objectives the content of internal crisis communication has its own categories: informative identification and factual.

Informative content focuses on data and the dissemination of information about the situation of the organization and its business. Identification content spreads the distinctive values and culture of the organization and its perspective on the future. Factual content consists of acts and facts to face the crisis, tangible signs that the organization is taking responsibility and going beyond simple rhetoric and communication messages (Ibid).

Simple combination of content and objectives provides us with 5 potential communication strategies:

1) Transparency.

This particular strategy represents a mixture between security objectives and informative content. Organizations that tend to adopt and implement this strategy are those who tend to diminish existing uncertainty created by information insufficiency. In order to achieve this these organizations tend to share information with their internal publics or stakeholders.

2) Cohesion

Often when organizations are including identification content into their communication strategies they do so in order to create and boost the sense of security. Identification content in combination with transparent information is aimed at creating the belongingness effect among internal stakeholders and stronger cohesion among them. Satisfaction, trust, commitment and control mutuality are the antecedents of positive attitudes and behavioral intentions (Ki and Hon, 2012).

3) Activation of behaviors

When companies communicate reward system based upon achievement (bonuses for employees that attract new clients) they do so by implying the activation of behaviors internal communication strategy. This strategy is the most complex one since it based upon factual communication.

The nature of strategies previously presented implies the consistency between the content and objectives but there are as well those strategies that display inconsistency between these two segments. When adopted by organizations they present major threats to trust and company's reputation. Following two internal crisis communication strategies belong to this group:

4) Evasion

Practical manifestation of this strategy can be traced with organizations that deny responsibility and actions they are originally obliged to implement when faced with crisis (Coombs 2010). The strategy in question activates behaviors but excludes description of actions and factual communication.

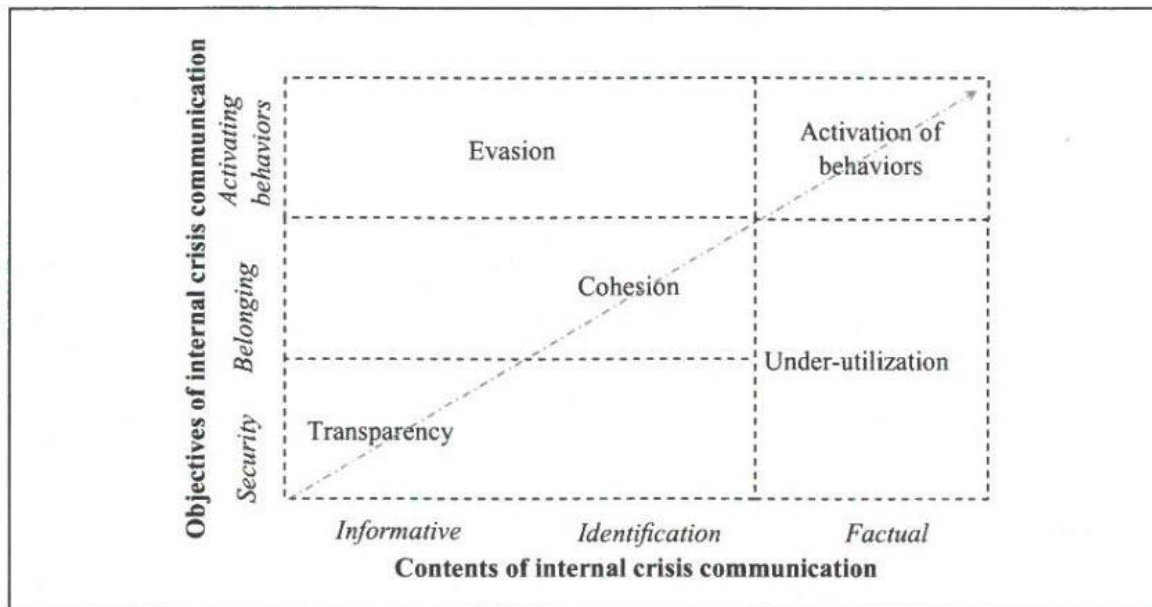
5) Under-utilization

The last of strategies is evident with organizations that tend to display no engagement with internal communication and are not able to perceive its importance in the times of peril (Barrett 2002). As a result of a such practice employees sense of security and belongingness is challenged.

Mazzei together with some other members of academia confirms the link between long lasting and high quality relationships and supportive attitudes and behaviors – or the avoidance of negative actions (Grunig et al. 2002)

What distinguishes alternative approaches to internal crisis communication and enacted sensemaking from those traditional approaches is the fact that they are a manifestation or an insight on empirical internal crisis responses whereas the traditional ones are more traditional, step by step linear description of crisis in general with no particular distinction between external and internal.

Figure 2.3.2.2. Internal crisis communication strategies: a multidimensional model; adopted from International Journal of Business Communication



2.4. Impact of organisational culture on internal (crisis) communication

Each organization has its own organisational/corporate culture. This particular culture shapes organisational structures, processes, external as well as internal communication. The culture determines what is seen as right and wrong, and it affects how the employees act as a group and as individuals. Organizational culture is the set of shared norms, values, and perceptions of reality developed within an organization where members interact with each other (Christensen, 2005; Bang, 1999). Additionally, organizational or corporate culture is the way an organization does business, it is unwritten but firmly establishes values (Fearn-Banks 2002).

An integral part of every organisational culture is its internal communication. As so many other organisational elements internal communication is strongly influenced and forged by organisational culture. Dominant communication practices within particular organisation are just one out of many manifestations of organisational culture. Employee communicative actions are influenced by organizational factors: the type of organizations, the kind and the history of the crisis, the company communication and crisis cultures and the company communication strategy (Frandsen and Johansen 2011). How managers communicate with their employees or how they communicate amongst each other, what strategies, communication channels they use determines the success rate when crisis strikes. Managers, who use internal communication, in a way that is perceived to be beneficial, will be awarded by more stronger relationships with their employees who will then reciprocate with positive and beneficial cognitions, emotions, and behaviors, namely engagement (Cropanzano and Mitchell 2005). According to Karanges et al. senior leaders and supervisors can achieve more optimal levels of engagement through communication that ensures employees feel part of the organization's internal community (2015). Furthermore they acknowledge the importance of internal communication in promoting supervisor–employee relationships as a medium to convey values and goals. By doing so they are setting a solid platform for a positive relationship between organization and employee.

Thus, internal communication and organizational culture are closely connected; crisis communication and how well the employees respond to it mirrors the existing culture (Brolin et al. , 2011; Mazzei et al. , 2012). Naturally, strategies like transparency and cohesion are solid prerequisites for employees not only behaving like simple work force but as company's lobbyists as well. On the other hand it is expected that organisational cultures who foster

internal crisis communication strategies like evasion and under-utilization are solid ground for crisis and their outputs potentially bear severe consequences.

2.5. Summary

Trends in industry have moved traditional focus from external crisis communication to internal crisis communication and thereby accelerated its progress within academic framework. As the interest for internal communication grew the number of different theories and categorisations related to crisis grew alongside. This study lists more classical definitions and categorisations later to be applied in the analysis chapter. Regardless of definition and categorisation two different understandings of crisis are evident, namely narrow information oriented and broad meaning oriented understanding of crisis. Thereafter two different approaches to internal crisis communication originate, first being traditional and closely link to narrow information-oriented understanding and the second being alternative associated with broad meaning- oriented understanding. Traditional approach includes the models of most influential crisis theorists Mitroff and Fink as well as the basic three-stage model not associated to any theorist. These models outline stages of crisis and associate particular actions to particular stages. Still, they differ in number of stages and attitude towards how crisis evolves. Alternative approach to internal crisis communication revolves around the concept of enacted sensemaking in crisis situation and the importance of action when trying to manage a crisis. In addition, 5 internal crisis communication strategies differing only combination of their two most important elements objective and content are as well listed within this approach. Finally, organisation cultures influences internal crisis communication, shapes interactions between employees and management is another element discussed within this chapter.

3. RESEARCH DESIGN, METHODOLOGY AND MATERIAL

This particular part of this study is dedicated to the general ideas behind research design as well as the type of methodology and material used in this study. Following segments of this study provide more detailed insight into particularities related to the process of creating the platform, structure and its general contour along with discussion aimed to highlight the original character and perseverance of this paper. The later will be presented at the end of this chapter.

3.1. Research Design

In order to conduct this study a qualitative research approach is used. The term quantitative within the qualitative research approach may be somewhat confusing but just like in this study it is used by researcher to code the collected data in order to analyze it and draw conclusions from it. *“Qualitative evaluation enquiry draws both on critical and creative thinking - both the science and the art of analysis”* (Patton 2002). In this particular case the research question was one to determine the type of scientific approach to be used throughout this study.

As a result of researcher’s previous inspection it was clear that there is a lack of scientific work made within the field of internal crisis communication. This being one of the reasons to proceed with this study has additionally asked for the inductiveness that is integral to it. The inductive character serves in order to add to this gap with findings originating from the data collected. Nevertheless, it is almost impossible for a researcher to avoid to be deductive when conducting a qualitative research. Robson (2002) makes a good distinction between fixed and flexible design strategies, where flexible one is strongly linked to data collection method and

qualitative approach. The design employes, among other things, grounded theory methods later to be discussed.

3.2. Methodology and Material

3.2.1. The Interviews

Interviews are generally used in conducting qualitative research, in which the researcher is interested in collecting “facts”, or gaining insights into or understanding of opinions, attitudes, experiences, processes, behaviors, or predictions (Rowley 2012). In order to gain more detailed insight into internal crisis communication of Swedish public and private companies researcher chose interviews as most adequate method that could grant new information and generate new insight into this matter. Interviews were conducted in the period between 27th of March and 10th of April. All of the interviewees had communication as a part of their job description and duties in their respective companies and are part of the upper management. They work in large companies and are stationed throughout Sweden, predominantly in Stockholm and Gothenburg. Being part of upper management interviewees are exposed to most delicate and most important issues relevant for the companies they work for and as such were able to provide first-hand information or answers to question asked. Throughout the interviews they were speaking for themselves and not as official representatives of their company thereby providing relevant and objective data to the interviewer.

According to Walliman (2006) there are three types of interviews:

1. Structured interview - standardized questions read out by the interviewer according to an interview schedule. Answers may be closed-format.

2. Unstructured interview - a flexible format, usually based on a question guide but where the format remains the choice of the interviewer, who can allow the interview to 'ramble' in order to get insights into the attitudes of the interviewee. No closed-format questions are used.
3. Semi-structured interview - one that contains structured and unstructured sections with standardized and open-format questions.

Studies research question has determined the semi-structured interview type to be the most suitable for this purpose since it provides the researcher to go beyond simple answer given by the respondent continuing exploring by posing additional questions without previously defined and set order. There are additional reasons for choosing this particular interview type and Nohl lists several of them:

- The semi-structured design gives the participants ample time and scope to express their diverse views and allows the researcher to react to and follow up on emerging ideas and unfolding events .
- Results obtained through semi-structured interviews can be compared among each other since all participants are required to express their views about the same general themes.
- Semi-structured interviews allow not only for assessing the participants' opinions, statements and convictions, they also allow to elicit narratives about their personal experiences (Nohl 2009). I, being a researcher was following previously created interview guide¹ accepting opportunities to go beyond that guide and do follow-ups on answers given by respondents. Going back to previously stated fact that internal crisis communication is such unexplored field and adding to this the fact that profiles of companies were so different semi-structured interviews seemed as most adequate tool to acquire the best data required for this study.

¹For interview guide see Appendix 1

3.2.2. Respondents and the process of interviewing

Creswell notes that in qualitative research, *“the intent is not to generalize to a population, but to develop an in-depth exploration of a central phenomenon”*, which is best achieved by using purposeful sampling strategies (2004). In relation to this study prior to the beginning of interview process a total of 30 communication professionals working both in private and public companies and indicated by their companies web sites were first chosen by convenient sampling method and later contacted by mail and after that by telephone. All of them come from Swedish both public and private sector. Out of this number 12 of them replied and agreed to take part in the study.

The respondents and the companies they represent are anonymous in this study. This anonymity was highlighted both in the introducing email and in later prior to the start of interview process. Both face to face interviews as well as telephone interviews were used for this purpose. Face to face interviews took place at respondent’s work premises. From those 12 interviews 3 were conducted in Swedish and later translated to English while the remaining 9 were conducted entirely in English. The average duration of all conducted interviews is between 45 and 50 minutes. Official titles of respondents varied between communication director, production manager, director of safety and security to director of marketing. In order to unify variety of titles present throughout the rest of this study we’ll refer to these as communication professionals/respondents. Another reason for using this specific title is to preserve their anonymity.

Four out of 12 respondents² were female and 8 were male. Eleven of them possess university degree (dominantly in communication and media as well as in journalism studies) while only one possesses secondary level of education. Number of years working for their respective

² For detailed information on respondents see Appendix 2

companies as well as the years of experience within communication and crisis communication sector varied. In the former case the average is 12 and in the later 17.25 years. The average size of communication department they were part of is 8,5 persons. Duty descriptions of communication professionals participating in this study varied but all of them included internal communication and crisis management.

3.2.3. The Companies

Companies chosen for this study belong to the most successful and widely known companies within Swedish economic sector. Out of those 12 that took part in this study 5 belong to public and 7 to private sector. Again out of the total number of 12 companies there are 5 visible pairs. Each of 5 pairs shares the same type of core business and in that sense resembles each other. However, the internal structure, leadership style, organisational culture may vary from company to company. All 12 companies belong to the category of a large size company. Geographically they are covering the entire country with their headquarters stationed mostly in Sweden's capital Stockholm and in Sweden's second largest City of Gothenburg. Public companies that took part in this study belong either to the state or to the municipalities (kommun) whereas private companies vary in their ownership structure.

3.3. Validity and Reliability

Creswell distinguishes between internal and external validity where internal validity is related to experimental procedures, treatments, or experiences of the participants that threaten researcher to draw correct assumptions from the data collected. The threat can also arise from characteristics of participants. On the other hand external validity often comes from researches generalization (Creswell 2003). In order to increase internal validity researcher encouraged all respondents to answer to posed questions and continue beyond that providing

more detailed insight. Researcher's previous journalist knowledge and experience has contributed to create positive and encouraging atmosphere. Additionally, respondents were interviewed in their natural working environment (regardless if there were interviewed via telephone or face to face). It was the answers and not impressions that were collected and later compared.

Reliability deals with the consistency, stability and repeatability of the respondent's answers as well as the researcher's' ability to collect and record data accurately (Selltiz et al 1976).

Creswell states that reliability in a qualitative study can be used to check consistent pattern of theme but overall does not play prominent role (2003). Having in mind the research design that involved interviewing, transcribing, coding and interpreting the data the reliability itself was enhanced.

3.4. Grounded Theory

Grounded theory is an inductive approach in research, in which hypothesis and theories are generated from the data collected. It is a means of systematically collecting and analysing the data to generate theory about patterns of human behaviors. This qualitative methodology can be used to increase the understanding of social phenomena (Clamp and Gough 1999). Strauss and Corbin further elaborate on this by saying that researcher does not begin project with preconceived theory in mind. Rather, the researcher begins with an area of study and allows the theory to emerge from the data (1990). In this case it is natural to expect that general conclusion/theory will emerge from data collected and it would be rather more accurate reflection of the present state or behavior. The value of grounded theory methodology is it avoids making assumptions and instead adopts more neutral view of human action in a social context (Simmons 2006).

After collection of data the entire corpus of information was broken down into different categories that emerged from the data collected. Categories translated into researcher terminology means codes. According to Charmaz (2006) coding is pivotal between collected data and developing an emergent theory to explain these data. There are three stages of coding:

- Open coding - the aim is to generate as many ideas as possible from collected data
- Central coding- choosing the most prevalent and most important from open codes
- Theoretical coding - refining the final theoretical concepts (Engward 2013).

Figure A2: Steps of qualitative data analysis (adapted from Creswell 2009:185)

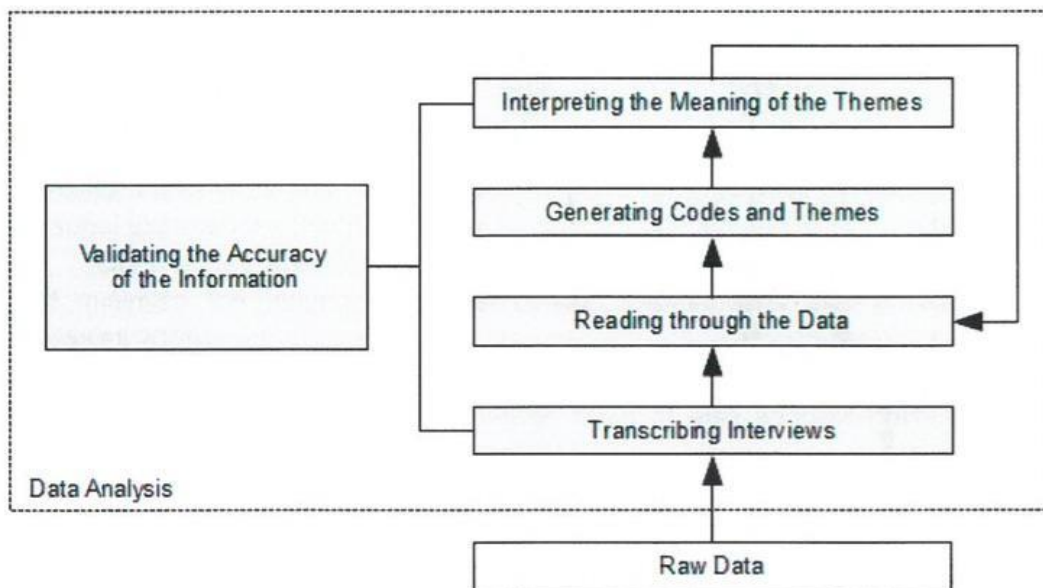


Figure 3.4.1.

3.4.1. Method of analysis

The analysis of data collected through interviews was conducted in line with general steps qualitative data analysis explained in Creswell (2009). Table 6.1.2 illustrates the process of analysis. In addition to it, brief description of analysis follows.

1. Transcribing interviews - recorded interviews were thoroughly transcribed from audio to text format
2. Reading through data -Transcribed interviews were read couple of times in order to gain an in-depth understanding of collected material only later to result with central codes and themes
3. Generating codes and themes - the process of picking up the most iterating and prominent ideas and organizing them into specific clusters, categories
4. Interpreting the meaning of the themes - After having structured and presented the interview data, the researcher interprets the meanings of the coded data against the backdrop of “her or his own culture, history and experience” and compares these findings “ with information gained from literature or theories” (Ibid).

This last stage involves the deductive feature of this study detected categories are compared with crisis communication theory as well as with internal crisis communication strategies.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Central to this study is the research question posed somewhat at the beginning *how internal crisis communication strategies are used in private and public companies?* In line with this an expanded description of respondent's understanding of crisis, their distinguishing between different types of crisis, internal crisis communication strategies they tend to follow. Furthermore, answers to some questions listed within interview guide will be presented as a part of general findings related to research question. Additionally, within this chapter a brief

insight into internal (crisis) communication practices of public and private organizations in Sweden will be offered.

4.1. Understanding of crisis

4.1.2. Waiting, expecting and reacting to crisis

All of the 12 respondents that took part in this study are clear and unified around the preventable aspect of crises but they all leave space to exceptions to the rule since their practical experience points towards this. *“The better I do my job within these four walls the less people will know what I am actually doing.”* says R12 thereby underlining that preventing a crisis is her/his job and the success of it brings her the anonymity but R12 like the rest of the respondents acknowledged the existence of failure rate linked to crisis prevention and in those cases respondents differ in general strategies they employ when such occur. This again depends upon the nature of work of the companies they work at. Former can be divided into three categories “looking for a sign”, “seeing a sign” and “reacting to sign”. Later can be divided into “common” and “unexpected”.

“Potential crisis needs to be analyzed. We need to know the risks and possible outcomes of both crisis and decisions that might be made to prevent those.” (R7). This clearly indicates the existence of first category “looking for a sign” since crisis can be unforeseeable. *“The problem with a crisis is that it is unforeseeable. There is a surprise moment involved. You can’t really foresee the crisis. In some way you can see that this is a sensitive issue and try to identify risks but usually you can’t see how much turbulence it can cause”* (R2) This routine is embedded into initiation of each project and as the same respondent says *“It is important to introduce this into everyone’s working routines”* same respondent goes even further by saying *“Sometimes it seems even justifiable to have these punched into one’s forehead”*(R7).

There is more to waiting for a crisis besides evaluating risks. For some respondents early crisis warning signals come from continuous observation and monitoring of society as well as of various types of media. *“We have people in charge of monitoring different branches like media, various communication channels”* (R5)

Trying to “look for signals” implies different kinds of activities generally conducted before there is even a slightest option of encountering a crisis. Respondents describe this process as getting prepared or being prepared. *“As far as we can we try to prepare for the unforeseen”* says one of respondents (R9).

Crisis warning systems manifested in crisis focal point of contact are very common among answers provided by respondents. These persons are specially appointed in order to see the first signs of crises and to set in motion internal crisis communication. Seeing a sign is crucial in prompt reacting and the right implementation of existing crisis management protocols that naturally involve communication segment. *“We have a system with one person in this company who is on call 24 hours a day. Of course, it is not always one and same person, there are 12 of them rotating. When they see that there is a storm coming and that there is a potential crisis approaching he or she will decide what to do and often gather a group of people and rise our preparedness level”* (R5).

This category is closely linked to particular nature of work that certain company does which we titled as *“common”* in this study. We’ll explain more on this in the following section. Seeing a crisis can be very tangible task and can include very practical experience for communication professionals. *“We were looking at our computers and we had a contact with the guys from weather service and they told us that this will hit us in the afternoon or in the early evening. That was an obvious crisis approaching, of course.”* (R3)

Final category labeled “*reacting to a sign*” in most cases emerges from procedures and protocols prescribed by the existing communication plans that respondents use when in crisis. Additionally it is a result of improvised and ad hoc reactions to crisis. “*We have predetermined ways to communicate and protocols to follow. When having a live event we have an crisis response plan that everyone is familiar with clear ways of how to communicate*” (R7). These protocols directly point to certain activities performed in order to tackle the crisis. “*Earlier in the morning I was contacted by local security manager who introduced me to different decisions they needed to make. At certain point I decided to inform the head of crisis management team (CMT), our CEO. He assembled CMT. We made an evaluation of what has happened, went through decision log and story log. Decisions were made*” (R8). Not only decisions were being made but practical actions were taken as well by respondents. “*We did a good job in relation to a crisis that has recently happened. We took down all advertisements that might be offensive. Same we did with the content that was aimed for our customers. After that we swiped our communication channels from anything that could point to the crisis. We informed our employees about the measures taken in relation to what happened*” (R10). This is just one description out of many actions taken by respondents in relation to crisis that they were trying to manage.

4.1.3. Categorisation of crises

Latest crises events throughout the world have added new types of crises to the list of already existing ones. In relation to this study respondents have identified or mentioned different types of crises which in their essence can be classified into two major clusters of crises. Their origins come from their type of business core. They make a distinction between *common* types of crisis and those *unexpected* ones.

“Normally, I would say in our business it is always weather related crisis” (R3). This is obvious indicator of crisis recurrence that later makes this types of crisis to be classified among those common ones. Still this does not mean that this type of crisis can be foreseen. It is only its regular frequency that makes these types of crises common. *“Basically you can say that there are two types of crisis for the company I work for. The one and the most common type of crisis is a natural crisis”* (R5). Other respondent gives another crisis example that is common for his/hers core of business. *“I think that every year there is a situation where some of our machines due to technical malfunctioning come to a stop and we need to evacuate. For us this is not even a crisis. This is a part of normal behaviour”* (R9). It is obvious that the recurrence of such an event attributes this type of crisis with commonness or makes the activities to counterfeit the incident part of *“standard procedure”* (R9). Finally, R7 sums up the general experience by saying *“This specific crisis is a very general incident that can always happen and is common problem in our business.”*

Charles F. Herman states that organisational crisis is unexpected or unanticipated by the organisation (1963). Regardless of how secure or sure a company or communication professional is crisis can still happen. This is confirmed in the following quote *“We knew that we needed to communicate this in a proper way and we were 100 percent sure of positive response that we could count on. In that sense it came to us as a sort of surprise that customers could in fact get angry, people started to threaten us.”* (R2). This entirely reflects the unforeseen/unexpected element of a crisis. In the aftermath of latest terrorist attack crisis in Stockholm respondents have classified these as unexpected or unanticipated. *“For example the attack that has just happened in Stockholm. This was something that you couldn’t foresee”* (R11). According to Fearn-Banks this unpredictable event is in fact a threat to various stakeholders that can have negative impact and generate negative outcomes (2002).

Often these crises come from within organisation and therefore we can talk of internal and external factors of unexpected crisis. *“Back in time we had a person working on important projects in the company and she was a whistleblower, she tried to point out that there were things done in a wrong way. She got fired and wasn’t handled well. Media got their hands on this. CEO resigned. This made a big turmoil in company. In this case we did not have the phase of raising the preparedness level since everything happened so fast and so unexpected”* (R5). Unexpected crises leave no time or space to prepare for, they emerge suddenly and out of nowhere often even leaving no opportunity to follow the existing protocols and routines *“If one find himself in a crisis one does not have time to go and look for folders in order to follow the procedure”* (R12).

4.2. Different types of internal crisis communication strategies

4.2.1. Openness and transparency as leitmotifs

There are so many questions running through the heads of employees when crisis strikes *“How does this affect me as a person? Is it worth it for me to do this job for this cause? Am I putting myself at risk? How does one fight this uncertainty?”* (R7). Depending upon the approach company chooses to implement different outcomes in relation to employees are generated.

A crisis naturally creates uncertainties among internal stakeholders as well and study’s respondents recognize employees being the most important ones. *“Coworkers are the most important and we need to protect them first. Our coworkers need to feel that we support them. They need to know that we are responding directly to crisis, that we are open and transparent as much”* (R11). This decisiveness to be transparent and provide information in order to minimise or close the information gap and hence minimise the uncertainty starts

from the moment crisis occurs and continues throughout all stages of a crisis. *“When in crisis it is all about keeping people safe and informed over the entire time to show during the whole time that we have a control over this. It is important to provide people with information”* (R11). It is not only important to communicate over the entire crisis but even to communicate when there is nothing to communicate about *“If there is an urgent situation in that case we are informing people more often even if there is nothing new to talk about. An hourly briefing is what we do regardless whether or not we have something to share or not”* (R11). This is reconfirmed by another respondent stating *“Even if we had no information the only thing we could state is that we don’t have any information. It is always important to communicate even if you don’t have something to communicate about, but you go out there and say it”* (R9). *“Safety first...”* (R7) in combination with *“All the employees were informed and they knew what did we do about this.”* (R6) is the practical manifestation of Mazzei’s and Ravazzani’s first internal crisis communication strategy that combines security objectives with informative content (2015). Sharing an information is the first postulate of this particular strategy and proves to be the most prevailing one among all respondents and their respective companies.

It is not only about transparency and security of employees it also about them believing and trusting the company they work for. *“If I needed to pick between customers and employees I would choose employees since they are the one to meet the customer. They need to have information to be sure in what they’re doing”* (R1). By providing support and the feeling of unity companies are investing in their long term relationships with their employees.

“In those situations where we’ve managed crises in a proper way we had employees being very grateful to the company. When my coworkers receive support and help a very strong relationship emerges out of it between the coworker and the company, of course under the

condition that the crisis has been managed in a good way” (R11). Respondents list this particular strategy of cohesion even within their overall goal when communicating internally. “The overall goal of this plan is to prevent and protect the image and trust towards our company and brand both among employees and general population” (R1). When R9 was asked what the company he/she works for wants to achieve when communicating internally in crisis the response was “Credibility is really important. Credibility and respect. If you have these you will get loyalty.” Just like Dick and Basu are claiming this strategy implies that communicative actions represent a behavioral outcome of loyalty (1994).

In addition, this internal crisis communication strategy generates trust, the sense of belongingness and increases productivity among internal stakeholders. Refusal to apply this particular strategy can be very destructive and according to R1 *“It takes a long time to rebuild the trust and the faith in the company”*.

Respondents identify these two internal crisis communication strategies as most used in their practice. Majority of respondents identified cognitive objectives aimed at creating realistic expectations in employees and increasing their sense of security. Content related respondents identified factual aspect to be the most present.

Activation of behaviours, third strategy that implies harmony between the content and the objectives just like two previous ones as specified by Mazzei and Ravazzani has not been identified during analysis of collected data. One of the reasons that explain its absence from the practice of communication professionals is its complexity.

When there is no harmony between the content and the objectives companies pursue strategies characterized with the inconsistency of aforementioned elements. In those cases trust, loyalty, credibility, image and reputation and relationship between employees and the

company is in danger. Two strategies mirror this inconsistency: evasion and underutilisation. It should be noted that neither of these strategies are fully adopted and implemented by any of the companies where respondents work. It is better to say that they are partially present in specific project or activities sometimes, purposefully or unconsciously used. *“There are plenty of small incidents that take place every year and that we do not go proactively out there and talk about it internally”* (R9). Another respondent says *“Managers and employees became very worried. Many figured out that they did the same mistake. So therefore I believe that to some extent there was a certain level of uncertainty over this, especially among managers. I believe that there was also anger since they were unknowingly making the same mistake, deepening the crisis but not being corrected”* (R11).

Decision not to communicate internally as seen here is a matter of choice and is made consciously. Respondents are also conscious about the potential consequences but still make the choice not to communicate with their employees. *“Yes, sometimes we don’t communicate. Sometimes we want to evade public interest. Sometimes we do business with public authorities and feel that we do not need to communicate that in a broader sense with employees, it is not necessary. But we are aware that crisis can arise from these situations”* (R2). According to respondents companies engaged in the study prefer selective implementation of underutilization of internal communication and evasion as revealed in the theoretical background (Barrett 2002, Coombs 2010).

4.2.2. Internal is new external

“To get the same story to everybody. The story should be based on facts and truth.” (R10), *“We try to minimise or eliminate the word of mouth, rumors.”* (R7), *“Expose yourself before, by doing so you have a control over what you are saying, be honest, be proactive”* (R3). By the means of careful analysis of these statements following elements can be detected:

transparency and truthfulness, evasion of rumors and finally control and proactivity. All three statements are related to internal crisis communication but if one wouldn't know that one could be easily relating these to external crisis communication as well. Almost all respondents share the same opinion and attitude that the same information shared externally should be shared internally as well and vice versa. Difference lies in order one chooses to do this. *"We do say that everything that is communicated externally should always be communicated internally first. We want our staff and employees to know a little bit more and a little bit before everyone else"* (R9).

Same practice is mentioned by another respondent *"Part of our polity is to inform the employees before the external public whenever that is possible"* (Respondent 6). This is not only a wishful thinking but a part of everyday job routine for majority of respondents. *"Sometimes I think that we should not have both website and intranet but one page that is both internal and external. I usually use same communication and same content both internally and externally. It is a thin line."* (R5). This brings us to a point of public unitarization or at least to a very blurred division line between external and internal crisis communication. All different stakeholder deserve the same things, they deserve honest, timely, clear, prompt etc. information. It is the format, channels and prioritizing that one uses to make a difference and distinction in a such a blurred environment. R3 is another communication professional that shares previously uttered opinions but it is the format that makes it possible to differentiate between internal and external. *"What we have is a written story, a single narrative but we don't tell the whole story to everybody. You use pieces of this story to different target groups (...) if you have the story and everybody communicating has the same story (...) you will be saying the same things"* (R3). Be it a single narrative, press release, Q&A or some other form how one shares its content the aim of crisis communication is still more or less the same *"...to go back to normal working conditions as soon as*

possible” (R6). Choosing between format, channel or priority when communicating in crisis seems to be an undefined matter for companies. Often when it comes to form and channel it is the individual communications professional who decides over one or the other. Prioritizing communication again is individual act that is highly dependent upon company's overall goals and strategies.

4.2.3. Organisational culture shaping the internal crisis communication

Transparency and cohesion are not only types of internal crisis communication strategies but significant elements of organisational culture. To be transparent and open not only towards external but as well to internal stakeholders is a signal to employees that they are not there only to provide a certain service but to act as company’s spokesperson even after working hours. *“If we are talking about internal crisis communication then it is again to inform them (employees) so they could feel safe and secure and go back to their families, tell what has really happened and still feel safe”* (R6).

On the other hand internal communication at its best can be an incentive for creating a more productive and more recognizable organisational culture. Such culture in that case becomes a company’s brand. *“If we look at the internal communication from a bigger perspective it is important that one has the understanding where one works, where the organisation is going, what are the goals. In general we are talking about building a brand”* (R11).

Another respondent claims that organisational culture can be an obstacle for successful and effective internal crisis communication. *“This is an old company, 150 years old. People working here have been working at the same place for a long time and their focus is to fix the problem and after that to communicate about it. We from communication department try to let them know that they should first communicate about it and then fix the problem.*

Employees here are focused at the technical part and that is the part that they are good at but they forget to communicate to others” (R5).

4.3. Importance of having crisis communication plan?

In order to understand how organizations manage crisis events a set of open-ended questions related only to crisis communication plan were posed to respondents. As previously stated all 12 respondents acknowledge the use of crisis communication plan. More than a half of these organizations had a components or fragments addressing the internal dimension of internal crisis communication. Additionally, more than a half had a specific person or crisis management group appointed. It is evident that within these teams two persons are regular members, communication professional and company’s CEO. Communication professionals belonging to these teams generally are in charge both for external and internal dimension of communication. Having a crisis plan is related to the use of intranet, mail, telephone, sms and meetings as internal communication tool. Only few listed the use of specific internal communication channels other than listed. *“We use some apps like WhatsApp to communicate internally in crisis” (R7).* Interestingly enough the use of social media platforms is not listed among the internal communication tools by any of respondents. Majority of respondents claim that having a crisis communication plan enables them to prevent the crisis but it is revision and updating of crisis communication plans that are listed as factors of crucial importance for further improvement. Nevertheless, less than a half of respondents revises and updates these plans on a regular basis. This can be related to the longer periods of absence of crisis. *“If you haven’t been through a crisis for a long time than you generally postpone this till tomorrow. I need to update our (crisis communication plan)but it is not something that needs to be done immediately so I’ll do it tomorrow. Twice a year at least you need to sit down and go through your crisis communication plan. I myself*

do not do it but I know I should” (R9). There is an indication that organizations, regardless public or private, encountering “common” types of crisis revise and update their crisis communication plans more regularly.

4.3.1. Choosing between simple and detailed crisis communication plan

All respondents list crisis communication plan as their tool to manage crisis. Still they differ in form they prefer to use and the content of it. This difference partially mirrors different understanding of crisis among different respondents and their respective companies. *“Our communication plan is extremely specific. The more specific any crisis communication document the better I would say. When crisis hits you don’t have time to think, you need an action point, a check list. Actually, we have a very specific check list. Get the information right, get the message right, brief him, brief her. Make sure that there is press release sent out to these addresses. Keep a logbook”* (R9).

Understanding crisis beyond written protocols and definitions makes organizational learning, even performance improvement possible during the time of crisis possible. This particular theoretical finding is manifested within the following quote *“It is when the crisis strikes that you learn, when you try your systems and see what is functioning or not and then you can improve after that. It is hard to say this and this are going to happen. There is always a bit of act in the moment, you have to adapt to what is happening”* (R5).

Perhaps most characteristic feature related to broad meaning-oriented understanding of crisis is improvisation. *“In crisis it is hard to follow all the guidelines, one needs to improvise”* (R11). Just like the rest of respondents this one confirmed to have a communication plan but in a broader meaning communication plan is only there to pinpoint specific activities rather than to provide a manuscript for any crisis. Different organizations will go through crisis in a different way due to different understanding and actions resulting out of that. Opposite to

extremely detailed plans majority of respondents use very simplified forms. *“The simple the better. If one finds himself in a crisis situation one does not have time to look for folders, one needs to have easy access to everything and it should be easy to follow this document. One needs to have a very simple checklist when in crisis. This should be very clearly written document”* (R12).

Another respondent reconfirms previous statement by saying *“You can’t have any advanced or complicated plans since they will not work in the real life...”* (R8).

Nowhere is the disparity between two understandings of crisis so obvious and present as in the different forms of communication plans used by companies and communication professionals.

4.4. Importance of leader in internal crisis communication?

As recently mentioned respondents that positively answered to question related to the existence of crisis communication plan dominantly specified crisis management group as a part of this plan. Continuously repeated member of this group was company’s chief executive officer (C.E.O.) *“There are 7 of us in that team (...) is usually C.E.O. and me that have the most trustworthy information in the beginning. Then we need to inform the rest of the team what has happened. They all have different responsibilities. C.E.O. is to assemble the crisis management team but as well to close it”* (R8).

All respondents with no exception indicate that when crisis strikes there is only one directions of internal communication, namely top-down. It is the upper management mostly lead by company’s C.E.O. who take part in crisis management in all stages of crisis. There is only one example of a two-way communication where employees are left with an opportunity communicate directly towards management in crisis situations. *“We start with informing 30 managers. We ask staff to communicate via their managers. In urgent cases they can contact*

me (communication professional), our HR or C.E.O. but usually it stays within their nearest managers” (R10). Meetings with the entire staff or all employees are listed as an option but tend to be impossible in practice. Respondents state the size of the company and number of employees to be the major obstacle for practical implementation of such meetings. Nevertheless, the size of respondent’s companies has not been the matter of discussion during the interviews and can’t be taken as relevant factor to this study. Still, this indicates a single, management directed internal perspective of communication.

4.5. Internal crisis communication practices in Swedish private and public companies

Another aspect of internal crisis communication that could be attributed to different organisational cultures originates in sole difference between private and public companies in Sweden. Among respondents working in public owned companies there was no doubt that being open and transparent in their communication, both internally and externally was not a choice that they needed to make rather the only option they have. *“We are publically owned company and we really do not have the luxury of not communicating in crisis. We should be transparent and communicative since we are not a private company to say no we don’t have time, or we won’t communicate about that (...) we do not have an option to say no we have to communicate and we should...” (R5). It is not only the employees who are at stake here but the company’s owner (whether the company is state or municipality owned) as well. “If we haven’t reacted to this, professionally and proactively communicated about it, it would become an issue since we are public owned company and we would take down the City of Gothenburg in this” (R6). Furthermore, having a communication department, crisis communication plan, policies on internal communication are good preconditions for a company to be communicative but some respondents find this to be a challenge especially in*

public owned companies that have a long history of doing things one way. *“Traditionally it was not so easy, on the opposite it was quite hard.”* claims the R5 while trying to explain how she managed to shift the focus from fixing a problem to communicating about the problem. *“First we needed to communicate to the employees that it is important to say this is what has happened and we are going to fix it instead of only be focused at fixing it”* (R5). Another interesting connection was highlighted. Public company owned by the state or the city may be a part of a larger crisis management plan, namely the one of its owner. In the state of large scale crisis company's communication can be integrated into their owner's and there can even be a special crisis communication plan developed. *“Our fourth plan is related to the city of Gothenburg. When there is a big event and crisis happens the authorities of the city are entitled to ask for all of our resources. Manager on duty is in charge for the initial communication with authorities but later the crisis group jumps in and takes the next step”* (R4).

On the other hand respondents working in private companies just like their colleagues are prioritizing openness and transparency over everything but still have an option to not communicate about certain issues. *“Being transparent doesn't necessarily mean that all the time you need to go out there and proactively talk about staff.”* (R9) At other times they even use image restoration strategies like shifting the blame from themselves to someone else (Benoit 1997). *“Yes it is our fault but the hurricane takes the fault also.”* says one of the respondents (R3).

When listing negative outcomes of a crisis respondents working in public companies list employee's loss of trust towards the company while respondents working for private companies add to this list financial aspects as well. *“We knew that this was an enormous crisis for our company and that it is going to cost us a lot of money”* (R3).

Among the respondents regardless if they work in public or private owned companies in this study, there is no unequivocal answer regarding the prioritizing of publics when it comes to crisis communication in general. Different viewpoints are expressed and therefore it was impossible to find the pattern that could place internal communication over the external and vice versa. Different viewpoints however can be related to different perceptions of crisis as described in the theoretical framework of this thesis.

In relation to Frandsen and Johansen's research on Denmark's private and public companies and their internal crisis communication this study did not establish any particular difference in how public and private companies in Sweden see or use internal crisis communication strategies.

5. ANALYSIS

To understand and further develop the existing crisis communication theories and strategies by moving them more towards the internal dimension is one of the aims of this study. This becomes even more important when having in mind the lack of similar studies. Therefore it is grounded theory that was used in the process of conducting the analysis of data collected through interviews. Following paragraphs will reveal more on this.

5.1. Traditional understanding of crisis

In its essence results obtained in this study point towards traditional understanding of crisis and in different levels mirror 3 major/classical stages of crisis. Furthermore, traditional feature resonates in respondents' categorization of crises.

If we take a closer look will see glimpses of both Mitroff's and Fink's theories in study's result chapter. To be more specific we will see reflections of Mitroff's first two crisis stages, signal detection and probing and prevention as well as Mitroff's prodromal stage. Very often it is a very thin line between study's "*looking for a sign*" and "*seeing a sign*" categories since seeing one can be attributed to potential risks approaching. Both probing and prevention and prodromal stage are essentially all about looking for a sign whether through routine based approach or individual activities related to particular projects that these organizations implement. And if we are to look at these through the prism of three-stage model then we will see genuine reflection of pre-crisis stage. Study's "*looking for a sign*" of an upcoming crisis according to these findings is an individual duty of a person that sets in motion protocols and actions and most importantly initiates internal crisis communication. Seeing a crisis involves more than one individual and is a represents a mosaic of interconnected duties and task shared between professionals always including a communication professional.

Finally, study's "*reacting to a sign*" division shows great resemblance again both with Fink's and Mitroff's theories regardless of the fact if these are strictly maneuvered or spontaneously emerged reactions to signals. Fink's acute and chronic together with Mitroff's damage containment stage mirror empirical data collected from respondents. Actions or better said reactions to crisis are central to all mentioned stages. Difference between them lies in the quantity of people involved trying to implement these actions and thereby minimise the damage as well as in their origin, be it predefined or ad hoc. By putting on the basic three-stage model glasses one can see that "*reacting to signal*" correlates with crisis stage, or simply admitting that crisis is here and actions need to follow. Respondents list organisational learning in the aftermath of crisis. This relates with final stages of crisis both in Mitroff and Fink where organisations analyze what has happened and learn out of that.

Again very classical understanding of crisis can be visualized on the base of empirical data collected. Instead of practical classification respondents described the crises they went through and what we noted in this study is that crises could easily fit into for this purpose custom made categories of “*common*” and “*unexpected*”. But what we see theoretically is that these categories correlate with the traditional cast of community and noncommunity crisis. Numerous crises described in the result section are nothing but accidents (noncommunity). Additionally both Lerbinger and Small include these accidents into their own classification and they can be anything from natural disasters to technological which involve flaws in equipment design, major accidents at industrial facilities, product recalls, mishaps involving hazardous wastes, and transportation disasters (1991, 1997).

They also recognize community crisis in the form of their *societal* and *managerial or systemic* types of crises. Here we can identify both conflict and non-conflict situations like strike, charges of wrongdoing by a corporation or its officers, plant shutdowns, worker layoffs, charges of excessive profits, business rumors, and allegations of illegal dealings by an organization in a foreign country (Gilpin and Murphy 2008).

A feature of this study’s traditional understanding of crisis aligns with narrow information-oriented understanding of crisis. Carefully developed crisis management plans consider all crisis stages and make distinction between different types. They also involve military like protocols and procedures with no space for improvisation. As in army the aim is to fight and win with no casualties. This type of practice or understanding of crisis represents a dominant paradigm where the best way to handle time-sensitive, critically important situations is to follow a detailed procedure previously prepared using analytical decision-making techniques (Gilpin and Murphy 2008).

5.2. Alternative managing of crisis

On the other end of respondents reality their traditional understanding of crisis transforms into alternative managing and just like Gilpin and Murphy suggest the best way to handle time- sensitive, critically important situations is to develop the expertise necessary for skillful bricolage/improvisation (2008). This bricolage, this diverse range of available opportunities and tools is manifested in different internal crisis communication strategies that respondents of this study use to manage crisis. Carefully investigation of results will generate with some keywords that keep repeating in results chapter. *Security, trust, transparency, openness, safety information, openness, loyalty, evasion, suffer* these and other words present the direct link between results and internal crisis communication strategies described in theoretical chapter.

Results point towards practical implementation of almost all of Mazzei and Ravazzani's strategies with focus towards those affirmative ones, namely transparency and cohesion.

Through combination of informing employees about what has happened, what are the actions taken organizations are reducing the uncertainty created by the crisis and thereafter creating the sense of security among employees. By being consequent in transparency and openness, proactively communicating with employees in crisis situations organizations are adopting the cohesion strategy and ultimately creating solid platform for trust and loyalty towards organisation and according.

Both strategies show consistency between objectives and content whereas strategies like underutilization and evasion show opposite. In relation to these strategies it is important to note that they are used sporadic and selectively. Organisations use evasion to escape liability while refusing to carry out actions that imply they need to resolve the crisis simultaneously awaiting their employees to actively engage in the process of resolving the crisis (Benoit 1997). In specific cases presented we can establish different types of evasion like

defeasibility i.e. the lack of information or evasion made with good intentions (Ibid). According to the results underutilization is not widely exploited strategy but it sporadically present in crises situations where organizations are now aware of crisis themselves. In such situations no internal communication is taking place resulting with decreased sense of security and belongingness.

5.2.1. Improvising while managing crisis

Traditional perception of crisis is leaving no space for anything but narrow information oriented understanding of crisis. But in reality, just as the results of this study imply there is always a bit of broad meaning oriented understanding of crisis that largely revolves around Wieck's enacted sensemaking in crisis situations.

Conclusions taken from respondents answers indicate a starting point of internal crisis communication in the form of a leader. It is the leader that initiates internal communication, sets in motion the rest of the management to manage the crisis. At the same time one of the key and most highlighted antecedents of internal crisis communication is leadership. Both theoretical and practical findings and manifestation display successful organization to be the product of good leadership and the capacity of leaders to make pragmatic decisions in the time of chaos (Heide 2013). It is the leader's ability to drive employees to engage into organizational sensemaking that is important and can make a difference when in crisis (Wooten and James 2004). Ulmer for example states that having a leader involved in pre crisis stage is of crucial importance since it involves leader's ability to communicate and scan for warning signals (2012). Reason to involve the leader into acute phase is to mitigate the damage and lessen the severity of the damage using crisis response strategies (Coombs and Holladay 2002). Finally, it is the leader who needs to urge employees on organisational

learning as well as lessons from the crisis in its final post crisis phase (Wooten and James 2008). Nevertheless, centralization of crisis management can lead to reduction of actions that are so important to this process. Study's findings recognize leader as one of the key figures in crisis management. Yet, it is leader that is a member of crisis management group what practically means decentralized crisis management. Respondents have confirmed the existence of communication plans and other documents that could guide them through the crisis but nearly all of them act in the moment when crisis happens and by doing this individually deduce which next action they will use while continuing managing the crisis. This can be brought in connection with the fact that respondents mostly choose to have simple crisis communication plans which as a result provides respondents with space to engage with sensemaking. Just like the field of internal crisis communication the influence of leadership on internal crisis communication has largely been neglected and it leaves significant space for further research.

Organisational learning, as mentioned in study's results takes place in post crisis stage or in Fink's and Mitroff's case in resolution i.e. learning stage. It is organisational learning that enriches institutional memory mentioned in Weick's enacted sensemaking and hence improves the capacity of those fighting crisis. Preparedness is integral part of internal crisis communication strategies used in companies where study's respondents work at. Preparedness is mirrored through strategic documents, crisis communication plan, organisational learning etc. that again enables respondents capacity to effectively use sensemaking and hence manage crisis.

In study's respondents words one can't be 100 percent prepared for crisis regardless of experience, knowledge, skills, strategic documents, protocols and procedures one has since

no crisis is same and there is no tailor made crisis management plan for any crisis. It is this niche where respondents activate sensemaking, use their own actions in order to manage crisis and see what is the next step. Sensemaking is inseparable part of crisis management.

6. CONCLUDING REMARKS

Having in mind a qualitative character of this study together with limited time framework within which this study was conducted commentaries made in this section are only to signal the indications of internal crisis communication in Swedish public and private companies. Being such they require additional academic research.

6.1. What are the practical indications of internal crisis communication strategies used in private and public companies?

The importance of internal communication in crisis is indisputable. It is the one of the crucial factors in providing that necessary trust relationship between the upper management and employees that again yields with effective engagement and success in managing crisis. The lack of it can range from fatal to threatening. Another indisputable fact is that strategies used to fight the crisis consider all elements or stages of crisis from evaluation of risks to “*lessons learned*” aspect in the final stage. Nevertheless, different practical approaches originate from different understanding and therefore are evident in different categorizations, different channels used and most evidently different strategies implemented in the course of action.

The content used to communicate internally bears a significant resemblance with the content used for external crisis communication which indicates potential unification of stakeholders or audiences. A ground for unification can be found in the red thread running through internal and external crisis communication, red thread being transparency and openness. Additionally,

communication channels used in getting over the crisis communication to their final recipients varies.

Internal crisis communication as presented through this study is unilateral and represents views or actions of those highest in the hierarchy. Rarely it involves employees and when it does it is not far reaching. However, since sensemaking is inseparable from crisis communication this provides employees with an opportunity to actively engage in the process of crisis management and internal crisis communication at all organisational levels and stages of crisis.

Internal crisis communication can vary from company to company based not only upon the content, channel, strategies but upon organisational culture as well. How company communicates in general can affect internal crisis communication.

6.2. What are the theoretical indications of internal crisis communication strategies used in private and public companies?

Internal crisis communication just like internal communication is relatively young academic field and being such continues to accumulate different approaches or strategies. This existing corpus of literature provides already a variety of interpretations and strategies how to counterfeit a crisis internally. But as it is evident throughout this study no general rule or strategy can be pinpointed and attributed to any specific type of company. Yes, certain aspects of particular strategies can be identified in different organisation types but still this is highly dependable upon the type of crisis. Documents used to guide communication professionals show openness to adjustments, further development, mirror uniqueness of every company and leave a lot of space for improvisation. In essence they replicate theoretical situation where the plethora of differences between crises always asks for further theoretical add-ons and leaves no space for a customized approach but rather space for continuous

improvisation i.e. sensemaking that is indisputably part of any internal crisis communication strategy.

6.3. Recommendations for future studies

The initial approach of this study is a managerial approach to internal crisis communication. An approach for future studies could instead be to take the employee approach, examining which internal crisis communication strategies different organisations implement and how employees perceive existing strategies and how they want to be communicated to in crises situations. As a sort of continuation this type of study could be conducted with employees of same companies whose managers took part in this research. Another approach that could be taken is a case study with same companies related to implications of internal crisis communication in relation to some specific event. Finally, future research can be conducted in other countries or with other types of organisations in order to grasp if some other factors like culture, economic situation, and educational system could have influence towards how internal crisis communication strategies are used in private and public companies.

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APPENDIX 1

Interview guide

Prior to each interview respondents were informed about their anonymity in the study. This applies both to them personally as well as to their respective companies. This not being a case study means that I as the researcher have no intention to discuss specific crisis. Nevertheless, examples can be used.

INTRODUCTION QUESTIONS

- What is your role within the organization?
- How long have you work for this organization?
- What kind of educational background you have?
- For how long you have been working within communication or crisis management sector in general?
- How many persons work in communication department of your company?

ABOUT CRISIS?

- Can you recall any or some particular crisis? If yes can you explain and describe what happened? When did you know that this was a crisis?
- On the base of this particular experience can you give more technical/structural description of crisis?
- Is this type of crisis something general that occurs everywhere or is there a difference among crisis?
- Have organization that you currently work for been through a crisis?
- Do you think a crisis is preventable?
- How is your company prepared in case crisis occurs?
- Are you yourself prepared for crisis?

ABOUT INTERNAL CRISIS COMMUNICATION?

- How do you communicate internally in relation to the events you just mentioned?
- When in crisis what is your company's overall goal of communication?
- Do you have any form of crisis plan that you use in crisis situations ?How do you use them? Do they work? Have you developed them lately?

- When in crisis what and how do you communicate?
- Who is the most important public in relation to crisis communication for your company?
- Who is your company's internal public?
- Could you describe what happens among the employees when there is a crisis?
- Is there a policy and aim from the organisations perspective when it comes to communicating with employees?
- What sort of effects your company wishes to make when communicating internally?
- Are there any situation, when you choose not to communicate with your employees?
- What does the plan include?
- Are there crisis that you do not respond to at all?
- Do specific persons have specific responsibilities in different situations?
- What are the most severe effects of crisis in relation to your employees

APPENDIX 2

Aliases	Gender	Education	Experience³	No. of years working for the company	Crisis experience	Private (PR) or public (PU)
R1	M	Higher education	34 years	4 years	Yes	PU
R2	M	Higher education	16 years	8 years	Yes	PR
R3	M	Higher education	32 years	20 years	Yes	PR
R4	M	Higher education	16 years	16 years	Yes	PU
R5	F	Higher education	17 years	3 years	Yes	PU
R6	M	Higher education	16 years	16 years	No	PU
R7	M	Secondary education	20 years	12 years	Yes	PR
R8	M	Higher education	2 years	10 years	Yes	PR
R9	F	Higher education	14 years	14 years	Yes	PR
R10	M	Higher education	9 years	20 years	Yes	PR
R11	F	Higher education	25 years	7 years	Yes	PU
R12	F	Higher education	18 years	14 years	Yes	PR

³ Experience in this particular case is related to the following question listed in interview guide: *For how long you have been working within communication or crisis management sector in general?*