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SELECTED ELEMENTS OF CRISIS COMMUNICATION

ABSTRACT

The aim of this article is to identify the significance of the crisis for the functioning of the company and to find possible ways to solve it. This setting of the research objective should allow the research problem to be identified and solved as follows: how should an 'entrepreneur' behave in order to avoid or relatively smoothly pass through a crisis in a company.

In order to solve the research problem and realise the research objective, research methods such as analysis of literature and legal acts, comparison, analysis, synthesis, inductive and deductive reasoning and abstraction, among others, were used.

The above made it possible to clarify working results and generalisations: the company should ensure crisis preparedness. In order to ensure that information about the crisis does not spread and gain momentum, thereby weakening the financial situation or image of the company, it must react quickly to emerging threats by monitoring the symptoms of the crisis. Early detection and precisely developed operational procedures can lead the company out of the crisis without excessive losses. The earlier the symptoms of a crisis are recognised, the smaller the losses. Efficient communication can effectively prevent a crisis from spreading further both outside and inside the company.

KEYWORDS: *crisis communication, organisation, safety, security, information*

INTRODUCTION

The emergence of a crisis within a company disrupts its operations and deteriorates relationships with stakeholders. Therefore, a company should provide for crisis preparedness. To prevent crisis information from spreading and gaining strength, thereby weakening the company's financial situation or image, the company must respond swiftly to emerging threats by monitoring crisis symptoms. Early detection and finely developed operational procedures can lead the company out of crisis without excessive losses. The earlier the crisis symptom recognition, the smaller the losses. Efficient communication can successfully (effectively) prevent further spread of the crisis both externally and internally, within the company.

It is no longer possible to escape the pervasive global economic gloom. It is present not only in forecasts, in bad omens, but above all in tangible reality.

Economic crises are a recurring phenomenon. However, while in the past losing money meant losing everything, now after a downfall, one can rise, dust off, and move on. We live in a knowledge society, where the economy is increasingly dependent on human capital, which continues to be an asset even after a spectacular bankruptcy (Kowalik, Karnaszewski, 2009). Given the present market changes, currently resulting from the global economic crisis, managers focus on improving operational efficiency. Changes in the area of human resource management are mainly cost efficiency-oriented. This applies to both companies that have already experienced the effects of the crisis and those that continue to be financially sound. Savings usually begin with *freezing* or abandoning ongoing recruitment processes (Makowiec, Chmielewska 2009). Other scenarios are also possible, but it should be noted that none of them can be implemented without active involvement of regular employees. To involve them in the change process, it is necessary to effectively communicate proposed modifications and ensure supervisor-subordinate cooperation. Therefore, internal communication within the company becomes particularly important in such conditions, and oftentimes the success or failure of the organization depends on its efficiency.

Materials and Methods

Various research methods were applied to develop this research paper. Firstly, a critical analysis of the subject literature was conducted. This allowed formulating the research question regarding how an *entrepreneur* should behave in order to avoid or quite smoothly navigate through a crisis in the company. The research hypothesis that can be formulated in this regard is to indicate that a properly developed plan and its implementation in a crisis situation, referring to crisis communication, constitute the foundation for the least troublesome *transition* through the crisis in the enterprise. To obtain the two elements, i.e., to answer the research question and verify the hypothesis, various methods were used, including comparison, analysis, synthesis, inductive and deductive reasoning, and abstraction.

RESULTS

Crisis is a state that threatens the survival of a company and the realization of its goals, limits the time available for remedial actions, and surprises decision-makers with its occurence, thereby creating conditions of considerable pressure (Slatter, Lovett, 2001). The contributory causes of crises can be changes occurring in the company's environment, as well as errors in its organizational structure.

The crisis as a concept is multifaceted. It can be perceived as a process of adverse phenomena or issues of a decision-making nature. Without a doubt, a crisis is considered to be a situation that poses a threat to the organization as a whole. Since the essence of a crisis manifests itself in disruptions to the company's functioning, as well as in the violation of specific individual and group interests, they often become stakeholders in the crisis situation (Walecka, 2009).

The emergence of a crisis in an organization represents a qualitatively new decision-making situation for the organization, in which, among others:

- organization's activities may be permanently disrupted;
- the organization has actually or seemingly lost control over its activities;
- the realization of the organization's strategic goals is threatened;
- the foundations of trust and internal faith in the enterprise may be destroyed, resulting in the risk of losing a good image (Sarnowski, 2005).

Crises in the history of the global economy are natural. Nevertheless, they always catch one unawares, causing anxiety and leading managers to make the same erroneous decisions, which may seem surprising given the number of past crises and plenty of material to learn from (Laszczak, 2009).

Research shows that organizations that can survive a crisis and effectively reduce costs are distinguished by:

- strategic approach to value building;
- visible leadership from the top management;
- deep involvement of all stakeholders in the process of identifying and implementing savings;
- attention to the morale of the staff and retention of key employees;
- organizational culture open to change (Sowińska-Bonder, 2009).

During a crisis, organizations show their true natures: some panic and take uncoordinated actions, others stagnate through inactivity, while others surrender and withdraw from the market. The rest can anticipate the impending slowdown, plan cost reductions commensurate with reduced revenues, and emerge victorious from adversity (Sowińska-Bonder, 2009).

There are many sources, causes, and symptoms of crises, both of an external and internal nature. Due to the multidimensionality of the phenomenon and its individuality in each observed case, it is impossible to list them all. However, currently, the greatest concern of companies seems to be the economic crisis (Grądzki, Zakrzewska-Bielawska, 2009).

One of the most disturbing situations within a company is the announcement of change. Change in an organization may manifest itself through, for instance, reengineering, downsizing, streamlining, rationalization of positions, layoffs, position eliminations, position reductions, mergers, expansions, inter-corporate synergy, reorganization, division by spin-off, and others (Murdoch, 2003). If a company does not plan a communication campaign well in advance before and during changes, the situation of uncertainty will continue to deepen, which can lead to a serious crisis (e.g., strikes, lawsuits, hunger strikes).

A crisis in a company does not appear suddenly. Initially, we deal with its symptoms, but over time, events – often mistakenly considered to be the crisis causes – occur, in fact triggering and leading to a crisis situation.

The following symptoms of a crisis can be listed:
- difficulties in financing current and innovative (R&D) activities, identified by indicators diagnosing the company's condition and its investment capacity;
- adverse changes in the volume, dynamics, and structure of sales (market presence) due to the impact of various diverse causes such as product aging, lack of new competitive products from the company, competitive expansion, distribution system deficiencies;
- imbalance between market growth rate and the company's product sales growth rate, expressed by a decrease in relative market share;
- deterioration of company's image among entities in its environment due to disappointments arising from the contrast between the expectations regarding company's activities and the reality;

- decrease in the company's value as reflected in the stock price;
- alienation of employees, particularism in actions, and internal conflicts within the organization.

Causes of a crisis can also be divided into external and internal ones. External causes (exogenous – independent of the company) constitute a set of conditions for the functioning of the company resulting from its operation in a specific macro – and micro-environment. The macro-environment conditions the economic activity of the unit due to its operation in a specific country and region, in a specific political and social system, and even in a specific climatic zone. The micro-environment consists of all entities that have cooperative and competitive ties with the company. The most important elements of the macro-environment are the bargaining power of suppliers and customers and the threat from potential and substitute competition. External factors contributing to the buildup of difficulties within a company also include technological environment factors: the pace of technological changes, the scale of innovations, etc. A certain role in this group is played by random factors completely independent of and unpredictable for the company, such as fire, flood, drought, shipwreck, etc.

In the literature, a division into financial and non-financial (operational) symptoms can also be detected. Financial symptoms mainly manifest in reliable financial statements (balance sheet, profit and loss account, cash flow statement, or changes in equity) (Hartley, 2020).

Among the non-financial symptoms, the following deserve attention: lack of realistic future development plans for the company, frequent changes in managerial positions, behaviours, and lifestyles of board members, strong bargaining position of trade unions, employee layoffs, or reductions in social benefits (Zelek, 2003).

The sources of information that a company receives can be divided into two categories:

1. External sources of information:
   - Market participants (suppliers, customers, competitors, financial institutions, owners, investors, governmental institutions, consumers, consumer organizations);

- Specialized institutions (consultancy firms, market research companies, media, scientific research institutions, governmental and international institutions).

2. Internal sources of information:
   - Knowledge holders – employees of the company possessing extensive knowledge, often underutilized;
   - Connectors with the external world – employees who, due to their duties, frequently interact with individuals outside the company such as suppliers, customers;
   - Travelers – individuals who often work outside the company, such as salespeople or service department employees (Zelek, 2003).

The above enumerations also indicate the stakeholders of a crisis created by the company's environment.

The implementation of information policy should absolutely follow the three general ethical principles: the principle of communication honesty, the principle of truth, the principle of partnership (Wójcik, 1999).

It also involves a precise definition of competencies and tasks in the conditions of information policy and public relations. The fundamental condition for the effectiveness of actions is the acceptance by owners or management that a crisis situation may occur.

Stages in the event of a crisis should comprise:
- compilation of a list of potential threats to the company;
- allocation of tasks related to planning actions in a crisis situation.

Efforts to prepare an action plan should include the following principles: informing and training the entire workforce in the event of crisis situations. Additionally, employees should know the name of the person responsible for managing crisis situations and the qualifications and preparedness of the person responsible for managing crisis situations.

In the event of a crisis situation, one should not avoid contact with individuals seeking information. One of the ironclad rules of crisis management is to provide information as quickly as possible, both to employees and the media.

Delegating authority related to a crisis situation does not mean that the company's authorities will be unaware of what is happening. On the contrary, responsibility always rests with the management, hence it is necessary to ensure continuous contact between crisis manager and company's management. In the conditions of an existing crisis, a highly stressful situation for the company, it is essential to remember to document the course of the crisis, especially to compile copies of information and documents that have been provided to various interested institutions (Michalik, 2004).

The competitiveness of companies is increasingly dependent on information obtained in the communication process, which at the enterprise level can be considered as external communication (occurring between the organization and its external environment) and internal communication (related to the interaction among members of the organization) (Stor, 2002).

No complex form of cooperation and collaboration among people can occur without communication. Communication enables appropriate cooperation among people, which is necessary to attain certain values and becomes the goal of individual's or several cooperating individuals (Winkler, 2008). Thus, the emergence, development, and continuity of any human interaction, structure, organization, or culture are fully dependent on communication (Casmir, 1996). Communication is the exchange of verbal, vocal, and non-verbal signals (symbols) in a specific context aimed at achieving a better level of cooperation between communication partners (Bodak, 2007). The primary purpose of communication is *to coordinate instrumental and interpersonal behaviours of participants engaging in a communication activity* and *it is not only about direct coordination of observable behaviours, but also about coordinating beliefs, opinions, attitudes towards reality* (Nęcki, 2000).

The process of effective communication involves conveying information to the benefit and understanding of all its participants. Effective communication contributes to greater proactivity, greater effectiveness of organizational changes, and an increase in employees' trust in the company. Communication should explain the forms of social interaction such as cooperation, imitation, leadership, and exertion of impact (Makowiec, Matusiński, 2009).

Good communication is also crucial in preventing conservative attitudes and developing group skills. Often, meetings and the exchange of ideas in an

atmosphere of openness allow one to understand individual aptitudes, making it easier to determine and assign roles within a team. The model of mutual contacts should enable resolution of any misunderstandings through their detailed discussion. This helps understand emerging ideas and is a factor that improves communication itself (Glińska-Neweś, 2007). Effective interpersonal communication is key to the success of any company because:

- it helps to carry out tasks more efficiently and effectively;
- it facilitates group decision-making processes;
- it facilitates the flow of information;
- it improves daily operations;
- it enables creative problem-solving;
- it plays a crucial role in creating a team-oriented work atmosphere;
- it enables the building of strong bonds between employees;
- it helps in resolving conflicts;
- it strengthens trust and loyalty (Brzezińska, Paszkowska – Rogacz, 2009).

Actions in the initial phase of a crisis are always most important. Especially financial actions, when, for example, investors nervously watch as their investments lose value. Opinions form quickly. It is clear that the management can worsen a situation by stepping in prematurely – by sending conflicting messages about the situation or appearing uncommunicative, overly optimistic, or avoiding responsibility. Therefore, at this stage, suitable behavior of decision-makers is very important in fighting for the company's good reputation and positive perception among employees (Wallace, 2010).

When the crisis is already noticeable in the organization and, for example, staff reduction, a drastic decrease in the quantity of goods produced, or services provided are required, the way of communicating with employees should be significantly modified.

First of all, when starting the process of layoffs, one should:

- remind employees of all the information from the past year – about the market situation, stock and currency exchange rates, etc., to provide background for potential actions and, thus, justify necessary actions in this area to some extent;

- indicate to employees what the company is doing and will do to help them in their unemployment period in the least painful way possible.

Actions in this area should be a well-thought-out strategy, accepted by top decision-makers, and most importantly, be credible and convincing. Materials informing about the difficult situation in the company reach not only employees but also their families, who directly experience this situation. Therefore, such communications should be well-considered and rationally justified.

The communication approach does not have to alleviate pain, but it should demonstrate empathy and understanding for the employees' situation. In such a situation, it is advisable to provide employees with a necessary information package, which should include:

- A letter from the CEO – short, expressing sympathy, providing clear reasons for the decision to lay off employees;
- Timeframes;
- A set of *frequently asked questions* and answers to them, mainly created to free oneself from constantly answering repetitive questions;
- Information about recruiting companies, social benefits, etc.

When conveying information, it is advisable to communicate directly with the employee, face to face. To a lesser extent, electronic communication tools such as intranet, internal email, electronic newsletters, etc., can be used. In the case of actions taken at this stage, the management should always consider company's good reputation. Stakeholders, analysts, company employees, and ultimately ordinary observers form opinions about the management and focus on key crisis topics.

When the crisis passes, the company will be able to breathe again, but that does not mean that the crisis can be considered over and thought of only as a dark page in history. On the contrary, lessons should be drawn from the crisis. Lessons that should be widely discussed with company employees and industry partners to prevent similar situations in the future (Anthonissen, 2010). Monitoring crisis situations in the sectors in which the company operates and drawing conclusions from them is the responsibility of every manager who aims to effectively counteract such events in the future.

It can be pointed out that crisis communication is not anything extraordinary in the functioning of a company; it is solely a continuation of company's daily activities but conducted during an extraordinary situation. In these conditions, many diverse organizational activities specially adapted to the crisis situation can be undertaken, but also, certain specially selected communication tools and measures should be prepared for use in the communication area (Sallman, D. Weir, 1999).

Certainly, the worst communication strategy is silence. Employees will sense the worst, and the lack of reaction from managers will only confirm their fears. Making empty promises is also detrimental. Communication should begin before any legal documents are handed to employees for signing. Communication should be thoughtful and stem from the company's crisis strategy. It's good when employees perceive salary changes or potential layoffs as part of a broader cost-cutting campaign. It is also essential for all information to be conveyed at one meeting or in one communication. If there are multiple messages and the problem is somehow dosed out, employees' perception of its scale will increase. It is also necessary to describe the situation properly. Psychological studies indicate that a message presented in an appropriate *frame of reference* affects people's assessment of the situation. It is advisable to emphasize the negative consequences that would inevitably arise if preventive action were not taken (Sowińska – Bonder, 2009). Solidarity regarding planned changes should also be underlined (changes affect everyone, both managers and regular employees). A skilfully conveyed message in this case can even increase motivation to overcome current difficulties (*we're all in the same boat*). It should also be emphasized that the situation is transient and that as soon as the macroeconomic conditions and the company's condition change, if possible, the previously applicable conditions will be restored immediately. The crisis situation should be treated as temporary and used as an opportunity to critically examine the company's structure and operations. Good analytical tools will allow estimating potential monetary gains resulting from various scenarios of changes. Crisis is often the only opportunity for such changes.

Typical model of the communication process includes: sender, encoding, channel, decoding, and receiver. Feedback occurs between the sender and the receiver. One of the most significant problems in the communication

process is dealing with noise. In modernly managed enterprises, information is of strategic importance and, alongside land, labour, and capital, it is considered the fourth factor of production (shaping values, costs, and revenues). Effective information management should be based on an efficient system that enables information acquisition, sorting, analysis, rapid delivery to recipients, and guarantees security. This system influences communication processes within the organization and between the organization and its environment. Communication is a common thread in managerial processes of planning, organizing, leading, and controlling (Stoner, Freedman, Gilbert Jr., 1998).

The common understanding of monitoring is incessant observation, supervision, and control of something. The broad range of meanings of this term also applies to phenomena and processes related to the functioning of the enterprise. Monitoring performs warning tasks that support the decision-making process. The monitoring system uses the elements of control (analysis of plan execution) which is performed at the highest management level. The monitoring system is not considered a company management system; it can be described as a diagnostic tool or system (Hejduk, 1998). In particular, the tasks of the enterprise monitoring system include:

- Providing and gathering reliable information (data) about processes and events occurring both within the enterprise and in its environment (market, competition, suppliers, customers, etc.), useful for effective decision-making about its development; – Detecting and signalling to users any threats and opportunities in the enterprise's environment and alarming situations within the organization;
- Providing management with information about the effectiveness of strategies, methods, or tools used in the enterprise;
- Making constant comparisons between the actual state and the desired state, informing about progress in implementation, and evaluating the effectiveness of implemented programs, plans, projects, and initiatives;
- Establishing the level of organization satisfaction with the provided information.

The tasks of monitoring largely rely on efficient information. Shaping the information policy in crisis conditions determines the future public

image of the company. Perpetuating a negative image carries serious consequences for market position and, consequently, the economic condition of the company (Zelek, 2003).

In risk monitoring, various tools can be used, including profiling analysis, early warning systems, decision trees, risk equalization methods, operations research methods, histograms, statistical methods, sensitivity analysis, simulation methods, financial methods (breakeven point, investment and indicator techniques), and alternative plan methods. They allow assessing the degree of threats in implementing initiatives.

Useful tools for monitoring responsibility centres include external and internal reporting systems (providing reliability and verifiability of information and the possibility of enforcing responsibility for its accuracy and punctuality).

In quality monitoring, tools related to quality control will be utilized, which, thanks to computer technology, can be effectively used in analyses supporting the improvement of production processes, such as Shewhart control charts, histograms, process capability and machine capability indices, Pareto-Lorenz diagrams. Crisis monitoring surveys assessing the level of preparedness for a crisis can also be useful tools.

Monitoring tools can become valuable and effective preventive measures against crises provided that warning signals are not ignored by responsible individuals. Only then, through efficient communication, dissemination of reliable information, and implementation of corrective actions (based on previously prepared procedures), can the escalation of the threat posed by the emergence of a crisis situation be halted.

Discussion

A good, current understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of the organization, continuous environmental monitoring, and honesty and objectivity in employee relations are of fundamental importance for preventing crises. Based on these factors, one may develop scenarios of crisis situations, taking into account various developments, as well as preventive programs. In such situations, top-level management should take several necessary actions, including:

- Selecting appropriate personnel and creating a crisis management team;
- Developing scenarios of potential crises that have either already occurred in the organization or may occur in the near future;
- Creating a crisis management plan.

Prevention conducted and supervised by top-level management should include the following activities:

- Awareness of the crisis potential (where may crises lurk?);
- Organizing a crisis team, training sessions;
- Developing an alarm plan;
- Preparation of technical support (telephone, fax, email, video conferences, etc.);
- Careful observation of competition;
- Developing documentation, procedures (learning from previous crises) (Rydzak, 2002).

The responses obtained provide the basis not only for determining the level of preparedness of the enterprise for a crisis situation but also for diagnosing hidden, unrecognized sources of crisis situations. Additionally, the analysis of the organization's level of preparedness concerns the crisis plan and is associated with answering the following questions (Sallman, Weir, 1999):

1. Does the organization have a *feasible* crisis plan?
2. Will it be useful for anything during a crisis?
3. Does every member of the crisis team have immediate access to a copy of the plan?

4. When was the last time crisis team members and other potential spokespersons participated in a training program?
5. Has the plan and the team been tested within the last 12 months?

Each crisis situation should be perceived as an event providing an opportunity to eliminate organization's weaknesses. The effectiveness of actions taken in such cases depends on the crisis management team. Well-developed crisis plans are worthless if not actively engaged by all members of the organization, especially a properly trained crisis team (Rydzak, 2002).

In situations of perceived crisis within the organization, various forms of communication can be ranked in terms of their effectiveness, starting with the most effective. The list may look as follows:

- Face-to-face conversation;
- Small group meeting, discussion;
- Speech to a larger group;
- Telephone conversation;
- Written note;
- Brochure sent by post;
- Article in a specialist magazine;
- Message in a newspaper;
- Advertisement in mass media;
- Posters, bulletin boards, outdoors, etc. (Goban – Klaus, 1997).

A crisis often changes relationships and interpersonal dynamics within a company. The sense of threat, lack of stability, and uncertainty can trigger heightened unhealthy competition, envy, etc., among many employees, which may not have existed before or were less visible. Their emergence or increased intensity further exacerbates the perceived threat by employees, as they become not only employers and supervisors but also coworkers. They cannot find support in them, but instead start to act as dangerous rivals (Baruk, 2009).

This necessitates greater involvement of managers, who should support employee teams mutually helping each other in these difficult times, utilizing communication, training, and direct meetings with employees for this purpose.

Companies experiencing crises resulting from erroneous, ill-considered decisions, sooner or later face serious threats, including:

- Boycott of company products or services, stock price decline;
- Serious lawsuits;
- Loss of trust;
- Bankruptcy threats;
- Significant damage to the company's image and reputation;
- Threats of losing top and middle management;
- Possibility of company closure in full or in part.

To counteract these threats, companies should develop procedures for dealing with potential crises, whether they result from internal problems or macroeconomic situations.

Conclusions

In view of the above considerations, it must be stated that creating and maintaining a suitable image of an organization in the conditions of a dynamic market economy requires skilful behaviour in crisis situations, and thus the possession of appropriate crisis communication, which entails a special program. A crisis is a situation that can threaten current operations and sometimes even the survival of the organization, characterized by uncertainty about the causes and difficult-to-predict consequences, which requires rapid decision-making (Krzakiewicz, 2008).

The condition for the survival and development of a contemporary organization seems to be a suitable image, on the one hand facilitating differentiation from the competition, and on the other hand constituting an additional dimension of the offer, thus increasing the set of values offered to customers. (Szuba, 2022).

Undoubtedly, a crisis situation increases interest in the organization, or publicity. It can be used for long-term functioning. Simplifying, if a mistake has been made, it is necessary to admit guilt as soon as possible, secure all potentially endangered parties, inform employees and other stakeholders thoroughly, compensate for damages, and return to normal functioning. Experience shows

that a professional approach even strengthens credibility. If the crisis is not the fault of the organization, independent, credible entities should usually be involved to investigate the situation. It is vital to communicate transparently with stakeholders (employees, media representatives, customers, partners, the local community, etc.), including informing them about progress in the investigation and obtained facts. Unfortunately, public relations practitioners argue that if there is no scandal and it is about conveying facts, some media outlets do not want to cooperate and inform reliably. In summary, a crucial condition for the success of a contemporary organization is a methodical approach to crisis situations to protect its image and even strengthen its credibility. The basis of crisis management in modern organizations should be a broad, fast, and reliable communication policy with stakeholders, which affects the organization's image.

It can be assumed that the objectives set out in the initial part of this article have been met. Indeed, it has been shown that the company should ensure crisis preparedness, which should also ensure that information about the crisis does not spread uncontrollably. It will thus not weaken the company's financial condition and image. In a crisis, an organisation must react quickly to emerging threats by permanently monitoring the symptoms of the crisis. Early detection and precisely developed operational procedures can lead the company out of the crisis without excessive losses, because the earlier the symptoms of the crisis are recognised, the smaller the losses will be. Thus, a proper communication strategy can effectively prevent a crisis from spreading.

It can be hoped that further research will be conducted on the matter of crisis communication, especially in organisations and companies. The authors regard this text as a kind of leaven for further in-depth research.

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