

United States Forces Korea's (USFK) Crisis Communication Strategies and Crisis Responses: The case of two Korean school girls' death

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ABSTRACT

The study investigated USFK's crisis communication responding to the case of two Korean girls' death. The two girls were hit by an American tank accidentally. The accident has resulted in anti-American demonstrations by a large number of South Korean. The current research attempted to see what problems USFK's crisis communication with Korean publics. Through analyzing USFK news release in Korea and Army News (ARNEWS) in America regarding the case, the study answered what crisis communication strategies USFK used and How the USFK responded to the crisis. The results showed that USFK used full apology strategy and its crisis response was immediate, but prior reputation of USFK seemed making USFK's effort fruitless.

Keywords: Crisis, Crisis Communication, USFK, Korean Public and Reputation.

1. INTRODUCTION

On July 13, 2002, two Korean middle school girls were killed by an American tank during a military training exercise. The accident has receded into the dim past, but it is still something valuable and meaningful in aspect of crisis management. This accident resulted in anti-American demonstrations by a large number of South Koreans, from children to the elderly, gathering at many places to dispute the Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) revision, because the Korean public thought that the treaty was unfair and requested that the United States waive its jurisdiction. They even boycotted American Hollywood movies in protest.

This event indicated that the American military forces stationed in Korea might have managed the crisis inappropriately. Thus, this research investigates how USFK (United States Forces Korea) responded and handled the accident with respect to the crisis communication. Crisis is unpredictable and influences an organization's reputation negatively or positively, depending on how the organization handles the crisis [2],[6],[9],[12],[13]. In this way, crisis means both danger and opportunity.

Most of all, there are some reasons why USFK must be vigilant in maintaining public trust. First, the American military stationed in Korea is a symbol of the United States, thus Koreans' bad image of American military has a negative effect on Koreans' image on the country. Secondly, soldiers who

serve in the American military could be threatened by Koreans' hostility. Thirdly, as previously stated, Koreans' anti-Americanism accelerated by a wrong doing of USFK affects political and economic relationships between Korea and the United States indirectly.

Any organization tries to minimize damage to its image. [16] defined crisis communication as "communication between the organization and its publics prior to, during, and after the negative occurrence." The USFK is an organization that plays an important role in maintaining peace and stability and defusing tension on the Korean Peninsula. However, the failure to manage a crisis might reduce not only its reputation but also their nation's reputation. Because of this, the organization has to recognize the importance of crisis communication strategies and crisis responses that maintain or restore its reputation. Therefore, this analysis will examine the problem of the USFK crisis communication strategies and crisis response in this particular example – the case of two Korean girls killed.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Crisis

There are numerous definitions of crisis. [17] defined crisis as "a turning point for better or worse," and "a decisive or crucial time, stage, or event". [9] argued that crisis management involves two main concepts; first, a crisis means a disruption of function, and second, a crisis can damage the organization's reputation. [26] also defined crisis as "a disruption that physically affects a system as a whole and threatens its basic assumption, its subjective sense of self, its existential core".

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These conceptualizations of crisis could be explained by chaos theory, because the theory describes irregular and highly complex structures in time and space. Thus, chaos theory emphasizes the lack of predictability in system behavior, unexpected and non-linear systems [28]. Those characteristics make chaos theory useful for the study of organizational crisis. Seeger [28] argued that post-communication traditionally has accentuated a precise message about the cause of crisis to diminish threat and uncertainty applied by the non-linear systems emphasized in chaos theory. This perspective suggests the strategies of managing crisis such as crisis communication strategy and crisis response [28]. Many scholars suggest that various strategies such as crisis communication strategies and crisis responses protect or repair the organizational image [20],[7],[8],[22].

If the USFK had used the strategies described above after the death of the two young Korean girls, they might not have been faced with the public's stormy demonstration against USFK and the American government. Thus, this research investigates how much the USFK responses to the accident satisfied the elements necessary to overcome the crisis.

2.2 Reputation

It also should be considered that an impact results from failed crisis communication of an organization. [12] described two potential effects from a crisis: potential to disrupt operations and to reduce the organization's reputation. [3] in image restoration theory argued that one of the central goals of communication is to maintain a positive reputation. [20] considered reputation on the levels of product and process. On a product level, reputation consists of some level of agreement of opinion, evaluation, or estimates of the nature and value of an entity. It is also a process in the sense that reputations are created in social networks where communication and influence play a pivotal role [4].

Reputation is used interchangeably with image or impression [20]. [3] also regarded reputation as similar to image. He argued that a good image or reputation creates a healthy self-image and a favorable impression on others, but a bad image or reputation may be an obstacle to interaction with others. Another important point is that reputation depends on social units. Bromley [4] divided reputation into three levels; a general reputation is seen as a collection of individual impressions. The reputation of a consumer good is called a brand image, and the reputation of an organization might be called a corporate image. [19] made more clear definition for reputation that is based on performance. Prior reputation of USFK might be a strong factor that Korean public responses to the crisis and that influence USFK's successful crisis communication, even though this study did not measure USFK reputation from Korean public. Consequently, the purpose of crisis communication is to maintain or repair an organization's reputation. Therefore, crisis communication strategies and crisis response are necessary in crisis management.

2.3 Crisis Communication Strategies (CCSs)

Coombs said, "Crisis communication strategies are the symbolic resources crisis managers employ in hope of protecting

or repairing the organizational image[7]". The symbolic is rooted in the rhetoric of apologia. Apologia is a strategy to defend reputation or image from public attacks [30]. They also suggested that four different strategies for apologia. First, denial is to disavow committing an act or attempt to present a disclaimer of intent. Second, bolstering is to identify with someone viewed favorably by the audience. Third, differentiation is to separate some fact, sentiment, object, or relationship from some larger context within which the audience currently views that attribute. Fourth, transcendence is to join some fact. [15] also adapted apologia to analyze how an organization depends its image from public attack. Apologia is useful in the development of the initials CCSs, because it "functions to situate alleged organizational wrongdoing in a more favorable context than the initial charges suggest" [18].

[3] combined apologia and accounts to develop image restoration strategies in the development. [7] said that, "account literature provided the impetus to beyond the limited strategies offered by apologia". [3] suggested seven crisis communication strategies; attack the accuser, denial, excuse, justification, ingratiation, corrective action, and full apology. [10] explained that, "attacking the accuser is a typical defensive position; offering a full apology shows the organization is more concerned with image repair and being accommodative. The other strategies are located somewhere in between". Therefore, selecting crisis communication strategies is a determinant procedure to manage a crisis.

2.4 Crisis responses

Crisis managers in an organization must properly respond to a crisis. Silence or "no comment" is sometimes used for a crisis strategy, but it is a deadly option [24]. Accordingly, crisis responses should involve messages and contents explaining a crisis for stakeholders or public. [8] suggested two dimensions of a crisis response. One is "form recommendations," and the other is "content recommendations." Form recommendation is composed of three crisis responses: be quick, be consistent, and be open. [10] said "a quick response is active, because it fills the information void created by a crisis with fact." The term "quick response" is similar to promptness in [28] strategies of managing crisis: prompt, precise, complete response. A consistent message is free of contradictions, making it more credible. Consistent message makes people believe a message is more credible. Openness means organizational members are available and willing to disclose information to the media and other publics. [2] also emphasized the terms "openness and candor" in a crisis communication response. [21] argued that responding quickly, telling the truth, and providing a constant flow of information are necessary for reducing a crisis in an organization. These elements could be viewed as testing the obvious in building positive communication relationship [8]. [23] showed that persuasion research supports the enhanced credibility of consistent messages. Openness is also an effective element to develop an organization's reputation in a crisis [14],[27]. Content recommendations refer to an actual message in the crisis response [8]. The actual message indicates information and compassion. Information is what the stakeholders need to know, so the information will affect them and an organization's reputation. Compassion or concern for

stakeholders is a primary concern for managers. It is an obvious or underlying guide to develop and test crisis communication strategies. [29] show the importance of concern for victims in crisis response. Other crisis experts emphasized compassion for victims in crisis response [1],[5],[25].

3. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Crisis management helps to prevent crises, but an organization cannot always avoid or prevent all possible crises [8]. Therefore, when the crisis occurs, the organization needs to communicate messages to its stakeholders. The message released from an organization once a crisis begins can have a significant effect on the success of the crisis management effort [3].

The first step to an effective crisis response is to analyze the crisis situation. How an organization views the crisis situation should influence the selection of crisis response [7]. Thus, this research investigates what kind of crisis communication strategies the USFK chose in responding to the crisis. As a result, the following research question is proposed:

RQ1: What crisis communication strategies did USFK use?

Secondly, this research analyzes the crisis responses, because it is needed to look at USFK crisis response to explain repercussion of Korean public from the two killed girls' accident. Therefore, the following research question proposed:

RQ2: How did the USFK response the crisis?

4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

4.1 Research Design and Materials

The methods used to analyze crisis have some stages and procedures. [9] suggested five stages and methods. First, assess the damage: the types of damage include injuries (number and severity), deaths (numbers), environmental damage, physical damage to building or equipment and fines, organization being shutdown (number of days and cost). Second, analyze messages such as verbal and nonverbal messages that the organization sent after the crisis. Third, record the messages from other source/stakeholders using verbal and nonverbal messages. Fourth, describe the organization's act as frame for the crisis. Fifth, report the history of the organization such as past crisis responses or past good works.

This research focuses on the second stages to answer the research questions and relies on sources from USFK news release in Korea and Army News (ARNEWS) in America. The most important element in analyzing the crisis strategy and response of USFK is to investigate precise messages sent to stakeholders. The stakeholders of this accident are the victims' families, Korean public, and America government. Because the Korean public and victims' families do not directly access USFK's messages and ARNEWS, they get information from Korean media such as newspaper and television news. However, the messages from the Korean media could possibly distort or filter the original messages. The best method to analyze USFK strategies and crisis response objectively is to gather USFK messages and ARNEWS and investigate those messages as

well.

Therefore, this research was conducted by analyzing the content of USFK messages and Army News Affair that reports all information related to the U.S. Army in the world. The content analysis for the news releases was done during the period between June 13, 2002 and Dec 31, 2002. A total of 16 articles were identified (12-USFK, ARNEWS-4). The end of the period of interest is when the legal hearing in which two military soldiers were charged with hitting the two Korean girls was finished. The analysis evaluated the type of strategies and the levels of responses on the crisis.

4.2 Measurement of Strategy and Response of Crisis

Crisis managers must decide what kinds of strategies they are going to use to carry out the crisis response. This research to examine crisis communication strategy (research question 1) used [3]'s taxonomy of the following seven strategies,

1. Attack the accuser—Confront or attack accuser
2. Denial—State that no crisis exist
3. Excuse—Minimize responsibility by denying intention, clamming no control, and so forth;
4. Justification—Minimize the perceived damage by downplaying seriousness
5. Ingratiation—Take action to make stakeholders like the organization;
6. Corrective action—Take corrective action to repair the damage and take steps to prevent a repetition;
7. Full apology—Offer full apology

To analyze the crisis response (research question 2), this research used form recommendation and content recommendation (Coombs, 1999). The former consists of openness, consistency, and quick response. The latter is composed of compassion and information.

1. Openness: how much are organizational members available and willing to disclose information to the media and other stakeholders.
2. Quick response: an organizational active response – it fills the information void created by a crisis with facts.
3. Consistency: free of contradictions, making it more credible.
4. Compassion: involve either expressing and showing concern for victims or having no such expression.
5. Information: What happened (what, why, when, where, and how of information about crisis, actions taken to correct the problem)

Openness, information, and compassion scales were measured based on the objects of the strategies. The objects of openness were victims' family, Korean public, and Korean media. The objects of compassion were victims, victims' family, Korean public, and Korean government. The objects of information were cause, location, investigation, and action to correct of the accident, and the level of information was measured in specific information and vague information.

4.3 Coding & Reliability

To establish inter-coder reliability, the same materials were analyzed by two coders who is doctoral students in mass communication department. Overall inter-coder reliability yielded a Scott's pi coefficient of .86, where a value of 1.00 indicates perfect agreement and a value of .00 indicates only

chance agreement.

5. RESULTS

5.1 Crisis Communication Strategies

To test crisis communication strategies (research question 1), the research examined messages (news releases) of USFK from June 2002 to December 2002. The total numbers of articles analyzed was 9, which represented about 30% of the total news releases during the period, which indicated that USFK regarded the accident as a real critical issue. Articles from ARNEWS were excluded to examine only USFK CCSs, because they were not directly related to crisis communication strategy.

The frequencies of CCSs used by USFK are as follows: attack accuser n = 0; denial n = 3; excuse n = 6; justification n = 4; ingratiation n = 5; corrective act n = 7; full apology n = 10. The results showed USFK used the full apology strategy most (see Table 1). The following are some of each strategy used by USFK.

Table 1. Crisis Communication Strategies by Time Line

	Attack	Denial	Excuse	Justification	Ingratiation	Corrective action	Full Apology
June 16						0	0
July 4						0	0
July 26					0	0	0
Aug 7					0	0	0
Sep 23					0	0	0
Nov 19			0		0		0
Nov 21			0		0	0	0
Nov 26			0		0	0	0
Nov 27			0	0	0	0	0

Excuse. Although we conduct training as safely as we can, we are only human. Sometimes accidents happen and the consequences of those accidents are sometimes grave.” (Nov. 27, 2002- Statement by General Leon J. LaPorte, USFK Commander).

Justification. “Korean people are very disappointed in this verdict.... we also think that our relationship is extremely important. It goes beyond accidents of this kind, tragic though they may be. We continue to have many common interests, including the common interest in security that is reflected in our defense alliance” (Nov. 27, 2002, Thomas C. H., U.S. Ambassador).

Ingratiation. “Hundreds of Soldiers of the Second Infantry Division held a candlelight vigil to honor the two girls and express their remorse. Donations of more than

\$22,000(26,400,000won) collected by the soldiers....” (July 26, 2002. USFK News release).

Corrective Act. “USFK has formed a task force with the Koran Ministry of National Defense. The task force will improve access to authorized training areas and enable USFK to better understand Korean perceptions to...” (Nov 26, 2002, USFK News release)

Full Apology. “ We are deeply saddened by this tragic event. I want to express my heartfelt condolences to the families of the children and pledge our resolve to vigorously investigate this accident” (June 13, 2002, Daniel R.Z-the commander of the 28,000 soldiers assigned to Eighth U.S. Army).

An examination of the time when the various CCSs were employed shows that the excuse and justification strategies were used only in November when two soldiers who drove the armed vehicle that killed two Korean girls received a verdict of not guilty. This time analysis can be found in Table 1.

To test the second research question several crisis responses’ scales were examined. First, quick response means how USFK responded the accident. On July 13, 2002 USFK Lt. Gen. Daniel announced the formal apology stating, “We are deeply saddened by this tragedy.” The announcement was issued the day the accident occurred. Therefore, their response was immediate. Second, in this accident consistency relates to the legal issue. The initial response of USFK was that they accepted full responsibility of the accident, but after the two soldiers were charged with negligence the USFK changed the attitude to an excuse strategy. According to the statement, on July 4, 2002, Gen. LaPorte said that, “It is our responsibility to the accident...”, and on July 26, 2002 USFK stated that, “We again apologize for the accident and accept full responsibility.” However, after the verdict where the two soldiers were found of not guilty, On Nov. 27, 2002 USFK said that, “In order to maintain the high level of military reading we must train realistically. Realistic training means training day and night using vehicles, heavy equipment, and aviation asset. Although we conduct training as safely as we can, we are human. Sometimes accidents happen and the consequences of those accidents are sometimes grave.” This message indicated that they responded inconsistently.

Third, openness was measured depending on three objects: victims’ families, Korean public, and Korean media. Three news releases among total news releases reported openness on victim family (19%). Korean public in new releases were presented 10 news releases (63%). Korean media were reported six news releases (38%). For example, on Nov. 27, 2002 USFK stated that, “It vitally important that the Korean people realize that the trials were not only open, ...”, and on July 26, 2002, USFK reported that, “USFK is also fully cooperating with the Ministry of Justice and providing the ministry access to our installations and personal.”

Information and compassion were measured to test content recommendation. Table 2 shows the frequency of information and compassion responses. According to table 2, most news releases reported information, especially about the cause of the accident. USFK compassion in crisis responses concentrated more on victims’ families than others.

Table 2. Content Recommendation

Items	N/16
Information	➤ Cause = 11 ➤ Location= 7 ➤ Legal Issue= 10 ➤ Action to correct = 9
15/16(94%)	
Compassion	➤ Victim = 6 ➤ Victims' family = 10 ➤ Korean public = 7 ➤ Korean government = 1
13/16(81%)	

6. DISCUSSION

Generally, hospitals and the military are examples of well-prepared organizational responses to a crisis [22]. Overall, USFK used full apology strategy and its crisis response was immediate. Openness in crisis responses focused on the Korean public, because they tried to manage opinion and maintain a good reputation after the accident. In this crisis, the most apparent issue was legal issue, because the Korean public wanted its government to take over the jurisdiction from USFK. However, USFK retained the jurisdiction under the provision of the Status of Forces Agreement between the United States and Korea. Therefore, USFK news releases reported more specific information on the legal issue than others. They also consoled victims' families by using compassion strategy.

Nevertheless, the CCSs and crisis response of USFK on the accident also showed some unsuccessful points. First, although the organization kept the full apology strategy, it also used excuses after the not-guilty verdict to justify the situation and persuade Korean public not to think the verdict as unfair. In fact, after the verdict, the Korean public strongly disputed the verdict and more people participated in protest on the issue than before. Even today, a civic organization in Korea is requesting that SOFA should reconsider and have USFK re-investigate the accident.

This case brings to mind some important questions in crisis communication. First, how did the legal issue change CCSs? The change of USFK CCSs due to the legal issue brought a more negative reaction from the Korean public. Another factor that the Korean public was angry against USFK might be based on not only USFK crisis response and crisis communication strategy, but prior reputation of USFK. The prior accidents committed by USFK soldiers in Korea, children sexual assault in 1991, rape and murder in 1992, assault in 1994, sexual abuse in 1996, murder in 1998, contaminated material emitted to Han River in 2000, and so on, have cumulated negative reputation on USFK. It implies that an excellent crisis communication during a crisis may not work well because of dishonorable history. In addition, the Korean media's new frame for USFK statements may have influenced Koreans' image of USFK, because media is a messenger for Korean publics. Future research needs to investigate how Korean public prior image or reputation on the USFK is associated with current perception or attitude toward USFK and how Korean news media cover accidents related to USFK. Analyzing media framing will be a significant research topic.

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