Once a crisis hits, the crisis team must work to (a) prevent it from spreading to unaffected areas of the organization or the environment and (b) limit its duration (Mitroff, 1994). Communication presents unique challenges during the response phase. Internally, the crisis team must collect and process information in order to make decisions, which have been discussed in earlier chapters. Externally, stakeholders must be informed about the crisis and actions must be taken to address it, including reporting the organization’s progress toward recovery.

What Would You Do?

BP and Texas City: Act 2

You are the spokesperson for BP, and it is about an hour into the crisis. The crisis team is assembled in the designated crisis control center. Local fire crews and BP’s own fire crews are dealing with the flames. Local emergency crews are on the scene attending to the injured. The crisis team has learned there are fatalities. A construction trailer near the explosion was hit hard. Many of the injured and killed were contractors working for BP; they were in the trailer. The local and national news media have sent crews to the site. The flames and smoke will make for dramatic visuals on the news. The crisis team will hold a briefing in a few minutes. What information are you likely to have that you can share with the news media? What questions do you anticipate being asked but cannot answer at this time? How will you handle those questions?
Discussions of external crisis communication must include form and content. Form is how the response should be presented. Content is what is said.

**FORM AND THE CRISIS RESPONSE**

The form of a crisis response is mentioned more frequently in the crisis management writings than any other topic. The crisis response includes the first public statements the spokesperson makes about the crisis. This first statement typically is delivered through the mass media, hence the concern in crisis management with media relations (e.g., Barton, 2001; Fearn-Banks, 2001; Lerbinger, 1997). The focus on the initial response stems from the fact that first impressions form quickly and color the remainder of stakeholders’ reception of the crisis communication efforts (Sen & Egelhoff, 1991). In any crisis, stakeholder information needs occur simultaneously with the crisis team’s information needs.

The form recommendations for crisis communications are to be quick, consistent, and open. It is important to keep in mind that crisis communication transpires in times of stress. Stakeholders will not be at their best for receiving information. Research suggests that people’s ability to process information is reduced by up to 80% during emotionally charged situations, such as crises (Gilman, 2004). Crisis teams must take care to craft and to send crisis messages so that they can be clearly and easily understood.

**Responding Quickly**

The terms quick and quickly are synonymous with crisis response. The need for speed in crisis communication continues to escalate as technology accelerates the spread of information, thereby actually reducing the amount of time a crisis team has for responding (Barton, 2001). The media report crises very quickly, including posting the stories online. In some cases, the key stakeholders affected by the crisis learn about it from media reports before they have been officially notified, creating a bad situation for the organization. The quicker the stakeholders can hear about a crisis from the media, the quicker the crisis team must respond. Obviously, speed increases risks. As the crisis team must act quickly, it can make mistakes. The primary risk associated with speed is the potential for inaccuracies (Smith & Hayne, 1997).
Johnson & Johnson committed a quickness mistake when handling the original Tylenol product tampering crisis. In 1982, seven people in the Chicago area died from taking cyanide-laced Extra-Strength Tylenol capsules. A reporter asked if cyanide was used in the Tylenol manufacturing facility, and the Johnson & Johnson spokesperson responded that there was no cyanide in the plant that produced Tylenol. The statement was in error; the testing laboratories at the production facility did use cyanide. At the time of the press conference, the spokesperson did not have all the relevant information, and the error was corrected as soon as it was discovered (Berg & Robb, 1992; Leon, 1983; Snyder, 1983). However, speed does not have to mean mistakes, and the benefits of a rapid initial response far outweigh the risks.

It is accurate to say that a crisis creates an information void. Nature abhors a vacuum. Any information void will be filled somehow and by someone. The media have deadlines, so they are driven to fill the information void quickly. The media demands trigger a chain reaction effect. The media are going to report on a crisis. Stakeholders may find that the news media are their primary or initial source of crisis-related information (Fearn-Banks, 2001), with the Internet increasing in use as well (Lackluster, 2002). If the crisis team does not supply the initial crisis information to the media, some other groups will, and they may be ill informed, misinformed, or motivated to harm the organization. The information void can become filled with rumor and speculation, not facts (Caruba, 1994). Whatever the case, the initial crisis information may well be incorrect and may intensify the damage created by the crisis. A quick response helps to ensure that stakeholders receive accurate crisis-related information and hear the organization’s side of the story.

Silence is a very passive response and reflects uncertainty and passivity, the exact opposite of what an organization should be attempting to create. A silence response suggests that an organization is not in control and is not trying to take control of how it or the crisis is perceived by stakeholders (Hearit, 1994). Silence allows others to take control of the situation (Brummett, 1980) and define the crisis for stakeholders. A quick response helps to create the impression of control and is necessary to get the organization’s definition of the crisis—its side of the story—into the media and out to the stakeholders (Heath, 1994; Kempner, 1995; Mitchell, 1986). To explain in detail, from the stakeholders’ viewpoint, a rapid response demonstrates that the organization is taking action and is capable of responding to a crisis (Darling, 1994; Maynard, 1993). Conversely, a slow response makes an organization appear to be incompetent (Donath, 1984). Control is important to credibility; it is part of the organization’s expertise. A crisis indicates
a lack of control in and by the organization (Heath, 1994). A quick response is a first step in reasserting organizational control and reestablishing organizational credibility (Augustine, 1995).

There are limits to being able to respond quickly. In some crises, it takes time to collect and to process the necessary information. Large-scale accidents produce great confusion. A January 1998 explosion at a Sierra Chemical dynamite manufacturing facility 10 miles east of Reno, Nevada, exemplifies the limits to quickness. Initial reports on January 7 listed eight injured, three known dead, and two missing. A report later that same day listed six injured, five missing, and no confirmed deaths. The next day, officials had the final count: six injured and four missing, presumed to be dead. It seems one of the five people originally listed as missing had not reported to work on January 7 (Ryan, 1998; Several missing, 1998). There was a repeat of the speed error problem during the 2006 Sago mine tragedy in West Virginia. Relatives were told that all the miners were alive, when in fact only one survived. This fateful error added to the suffering of the families and townspeople. It takes time to collect some types of information.

A crisis team might have to appear before the media with an incomplete story. That is OK. There is no sin in telling the media the crisis team does not know something but will provide the information as soon as possible. Consider a variation to the Sierra Chemical case: The Sierra Chemical crisis team decides to delay a press conference until it has all of the information about the explosion. In the mean time, the local news media are telling people about suspected causes. Perhaps a disgruntled, former employee claims the accident was due to mismanagement. Mismanagement is the explanatory theme reported as a likely cause of the blast because no other reasons are forthcoming. The initial news stories have Sierra Chemical responsible for the workers’ deaths and injuries. This theme frames the thinking of reporters and other stakeholders. Speculation and rumor inadvertently become crisis fact, at least for awhile. Better to have the spokesperson saying the cause or extent of damages is still under investigation than stakeholders being fed inaccurate information.

Lack of information and knowledge coupled with the need for a fast response can beget two media communication “sins.” The first is “no comment.” The danger is that stakeholders hear “we’re guilty” instead of “no comment” (refer back to Chapter 5’s discussion of spokesperson training for more on no-comment statements and silence.) Better to say the information is not yet available but will be reported to the media as soon as it is received. This brings up the
second sin: not delivering on the information promised to the media (Birch, 1994; Gonzalez-Herrero & Pratt, 1995). A good organization–media relationship is built on trust, and trust requires an organization to deliver on its promises. Failure to provide promised information damages the organization–media relationship, thereby eroding the organization’s credibility with the media. If information is promised, it had better be delivered in some way.

**Speaking With One Voice: Consistency**

The organization must deliver consistent messages to stakeholders, and a unified response promotes consistency. As has been mentioned before, consistency does not mean having just one person speak for the organization every time there is a public statement, as some crisis experts recommend (Carney & Jorden, 1993). Rather, speaking with one voice means coordinating the efforts of the official spokespersons and discouraging other organizational members from becoming unofficial spokespersons (Seitel, 1983). Chapter 5 detailed this point in the spokesperson discussion. The crisis team must ensure that the team of spokespersons is well prepared to ensure consistency in their responses. Spokespersons sharing the same information base are more consistent than those who do not. Consistency is essential to building the credibility of the response. A consistent message is more believable than an inconsistent one (Clampitt, 1991; Garvin, 1996).

There is no way to ensure the consistency or accuracy of messages from unofficial spokespersons, and these can be any employee the media happen to persuade to answer questions. The CMP specifies the process for handling inquiries. The process should be reinforced to employees so that they fight the urge to speak for the company. It is hard for employees to resist the opportunity to be on the local news. A camera crew appears as an employee is leaving work. The employee has a chance to be on television. Why not comment on the crisis? Most employees are not aware of the perils of talking to reporters thirsty for a scoop. Again, speculation and rumor can enter the media through comments made by unofficial spokespersons. And of course, employees will talk to friends and family about the crisis. The best defense against inappropriate employee comments is to keep employees informed. They should receive timely updates through a mix of the Intranet, mass notifications, and briefings. If employees understand the crisis, they can better articulate it to the media, friends, and family. The CMP and crisis training can help to avoid inconsistency.
Openness

The openness of an organization is a multifaceted concept. Openness means (a) availability to the media, (b) willingness to disclose information, and (c) honesty. Availability means that a spokesperson will answer inquiries in a timely fashion, immediately if the information is available. In a crisis, the focus is on the media, but other stakeholders may ask or demand that their questions be answered. Neighbors of a facility may want to know how a chemical leak might affect them, or investors might want to know the financial impact of the crisis. The foundation for availability should have been developed prior to the crisis. The organization should have a history of being responsive to the needs of stakeholders. During a crisis, this responsiveness takes the form of spokespersons or other crisis team members making every reasonable attempt to respond to questions promptly. Reasonableness is an important qualifier.

As I’ve mentioned, sometimes the situation does not allow for an immediate response. When delays are necessary, tell stakeholders why the question cannot be answered and when they might be able to expect a response (Stewart & Cash, 1997). Never let a request go unacknowledged, or you risk damaging the stakeholder–organization relationship. Communication with stakeholders is a two-way process. You must honor their requests if you expect them to accept the organization’s messages.

A typical struggle in crisis management is between the legal perspective for limited disclosure of crisis-related information and the public relations perspective for full disclosure (Fitzpatrick & Rubin, 1995; Kaufmann, Kesner, & Hazen, 1994; Twardy, 1994; Tyler, 1997). The choice actually is on a continuum between saying as little as possible (limited disclosure) or revealing everything the organization knows about the crisis (full disclosure). Cautious full disclosure is preached heavily in crisis management circles (Kaufmann et al., 1994). However, full disclosure is rarely always possible or advisable. Some crisis-related information may be proprietary, covered by privacy laws, involve company policies, or be sensitive. This means some information cannot be disseminated publicly. At other times, full disclosure could exacerbate a crisis by escalating the direct and indirect costs of litigation. Direct costs involve the amount of money awarded to plaintiffs while indirect costs include trial costs, personnel matters, lost work time, deaths, serious injuries, and possible regulatory changes (Kaufmann et al., 1994). Organizations must consider their responsibility to stockholders, creditors, and employees as well as to victims.
(Tyler, 1997). Simply put, there are times when an organization must protect its financial assets. Crisis managers choose what level of disclosure to employ during a crisis.

The disclosure debate raises the question of honesty. A common recommendation for crisis managers is to be honest and not lie to stakeholders. Stakeholders are angrier when an organization lies about a crisis than when an organization has a crisis (Caruba, 1994). Limited disclosure—not revealing critical information—is not meant to be a form of deception. In fact, an organization should fully disclose any and all information about a crisis if there are risks of further harm or even death resulting from the crisis. Limited disclosure should not be used as a form of stonewalling. It should be used to disclose only the information stakeholders need to know. Of course, what stakeholders need to know is difficult to define, and each crisis management team should establish guidelines for when it will utilize full or limited disclosure. (See Kaufmann et al. (1994) and Tyler (1997) for discussions about the ethics and procedures for using limited disclosure.) Remember, lack of honesty seriously damages organizational-stakeholder relationships—destroys the organization’s reputation—and can lead to massive monetary awards against the organization in future lawsuits (Fitzpatrick, 1995).

**CONTENT AND THE CRISIS RESPONSE**

What is actually said during a crisis has serious ramifications for the success of the crisis management effort. As mentioned, key goals in the crisis management process are to prevent or minimize damage, maintain the organization’s operations, and repair reputational damage. Clear communication is essential to each of these three goals. Crisis response content can be divided into three sequential categories: (1) instructing information, (2) adjusting information, and (3) reputation management. The first messages must present instructing information followed by adjusting information then reputation repair (Sturges, 1994). Again, clarity is a concern as emotions will reduce stakeholders’ ability to process information.

**Instructing Information**

Instructing information focuses on telling stakeholders what to do to protect themselves physically in the crisis. People are the first
priority in any crisis, so instructing information must come first. When a crisis hits, stakeholders want to know what happened, and they need to know how the crisis will or might affect them. Stakeholders should be told if there is anything they themselves need to do in order to protect themselves. Stakeholders may need to know to evacuate an area, find adequate shelter in-place, to boil drinking water, to go somewhere for assistance, or to return a defective product (Sturges, 1994). Instructing information satisfies the needs of both the stakeholders and the crisis team. The stakeholders receive the information they require to protect themselves; the crisis team cultivates the perception that the organization is once more in control of the situation.

Product harm and accidents illustrate the need for instructing information. Products can be defective and place the users at risk. Here’s an example: In June of 2006, HP recalled the Firmware update program for its Photosmart R707 digital cameras. A defect in the Firmware caused single-use, nonrechargeable batteries to overheat and become a fire hazard when the AC power adapter or HP R-series docking station was used. The Firmware was unable to properly control battery charging, so an update was created and made available to consumers (Important safety, 2006). Here’s another: On average, 40,000 people each year either must be evacuated or sheltered in place because of a chemical release (Kleindorfer, Freeman, & Lowe, 2000). In May of 2004, residents within a one-mile radius of a BioLab warehouse in Conyers, Georgia, were asked to evacuate. The evacuation was necessary because a fire at the warehouse released toxic smoke from burning pool treatment chemicals (Intense chemical, 2004).

Business continuity creates a second type of instructing information—how the crisis affects business operations. As noted in the crisis management plan discussion, business continuity plans outline what the organization will do to maintain operations and to restore business as usual. Various stakeholders must receive information about the implementation of the business continuity plan. For example, maintaining operations may involve renting equipment, using different facilities, and even hiring other employees. In terms of business continuity, this is known as *interim processing* (Myers, 1993). All the people and vendors necessary to get the interim processing phase up and running must be contacted and given specific instructions. Moreover, employees, suppliers, and distributors must know how the interim processing affects them. When and where do employees report to work? When and where are deliveries to be made? Is the supply chain disrupted, and if so, how long is it expected to be? These are critical questions that the crisis team must answer through instructing information.
Once business is restored to normal, the relevant stakeholders must be informed of the change as well (Myers, 1993).

At this point, the crisis team must consider connecting with employee assistance programs. Employees need to know such instructing information as how they will be paid during the crisis and how benefits information will be processed. Human resources people are important crisis team members when it comes to handling employee assistance concerns.

---

**What Would You Do?**

**Diamond Pet Foods and Toxic Dog Food: Act 1**

In late 2005, reports began to surface of dogs suffering from aflatoxin in their food and at least 76 dying from it. Aflatoxin is a fungus on corn that can damage a dog’s liver. The Food and Drug Administration found that all of the stricken dogs were eating Diamond pet food. The company tests all corn shipments for aflatoxin and rejects shipments that test too high. Diamond Pet Foods has decided to recall the related dog food products. What type of instructing information would consumers need? What other messages would you include in your crisis response and why? What would you do to help make sure pet owners hear of this recall? What other groups might be willing to help get your message to owners?

---

**Adjusting Information**

Adjusting information responses help stakeholders cope psychologically with the crisis. Stress is created by the uncertainty and potential harm of a crisis. On a basic level, stakeholders need to know what happened: the what, when, where, why, and how information about the crisis (Ammerman, 1995; Bergman, 1994). Stakeholders are reassured when they know what happened. Moreover, stakeholders want information about what is being done to prevent a repeat of the crisis and to protect them from future crises. Communicating action taken to prevent a similar crisis is known as corrective action. Corrective action reduces psychological stress by reassuring stakeholders that their safety is a priority (Sellnow, Ulmer, & Snider, 1998). Stakeholders are reassured when they know the crisis situation is being controlled. Instructing information furthers the perception that the organization has regained control of the situation. It is desirable to present corrective
action as early as possible in the crisis response. The limitation to corrective action is that it may take time to develop. The cause of a crisis may take weeks or months to uncover (Ray, 1999). Corrective actions cannot be developed until the cause is known. If an attempt is made without solid knowledge, it is speculating, and that violates a basic “Don’t” of crisis communication. If crisis managers speculate and are wrong, they appear to be deceptive or incompetent.

A variation of corrective action is the renewal response strategy, which takes a positive approach to crisis communication. The focus is on rebuilding confidence and restoring the organization, not on assigning or averting blame (Seeger & Ulmer, 2001; Sellnow, Seeger, & Ulmer, 2002; Ulmer & Sellnow, 2002; Ulmer, Sellnow, & Seeger, 2006). Ulmer’s (2001) study of Malden Mills’s recovery from a devastating fire illustrated renewal. The owner, Aaron Feurstein, pledged to rebuild the mill and to pay workers until the mill was rebuilt. For renewal to work, the organization needs a favorable reputation, or the promises of renewal will ring hollow. The renewal pledge must be consistent with the organization’s core values (Ulmer & Sellnow, 2002). Though limited as to when it can be employed, renewal can be a very powerful and positive crisis response.

Employee assistance programs are critical for adjusting information. Crises are traumatic incidents that can produce debilitating levels of stress. Traumatic stress incidents overwhelm a person’s ability to cope. Seeing people injured or killed in accidents, workplace violence, or natural disasters all qualify as traumatic stress incidents. Immediate and long-term interventions, such as defusing and debriefing, may be necessary to help employees and perhaps other stakeholders to adjust properly. Defusing sessions are conducted immediately after the crisis and provide a framework to help people cope. Debriefing sessions are therapeutic interventions at the group or individual level. Any type of traumatic stress response should be handled by qualified professionals.

Crises have the potential to create an entirely new class of stakeholders: the victims. Victims are those people who have suffered physically, mentally, or financially from the crisis. For instance, employees may be injured in an industrial accident, customers may be traumatized by the violence in an accident, or investors may lose dividends due to the costs of a recall or a drop in stock prices. Victims expect an organization to express concern for them (Patel & Reinsch, 2003; Sen & Egelhoff, 1991). Expressing compassion does not mean an organization necessarily admits responsibility. Rather, the spokesperson expresses sympathy and concern for the victims. Sympathy can be expressed without incurring the liability associated with taking responsibility for
a crisis (Fitzpatrick, 1995; Tyler, 1997). The key is that the expression of concern cannot include an overt statement accepting responsibility. However, lawyers may still try to use expressions of concern against an organization in court. Texas, California, Florida, and Massachusetts all have laws that prohibit statements of concern as being used as evidence to prove fault in civil cases (Cohen, 2002; Fuchs-Burnett, 2002). Expressions of concern do make victims feel better about the crisis and hold less animosity toward the organization (Cohen, 2002; Kellerman, 2006).

What Would You Do?

**Bausch & Lomb and ReNu with MoistureLoc: Act 2**

It is April 10, 2006, and the FDA and CDC have posted warning about Fusarium keratitis on their Web sites. The messages note that ReNu with MoistureLoc was used by 26 of 30 people interviewed about having infections. The messages also note that Bausch & Lomb has stopped producing and shipping ReNu with MoistureLoc and that investigations so far have shown no proof that the product causes the infection. At this point, there has been no recall of the product. However, large retailers, such as Wal-Mart, Walgreens, CVS, and Rite Aid, are pulling the product from their shelves. Bausch & Lomb tells people about stopping shipments, gives people the warning signs of a Fusarium keratitis infection, and reminds people to properly clean their contact lens. Messages from the American Optometric Association reinforce the Bausch & Lomb message by saying improper cleaning can lead to Fusarium keratitis. Do you agree that this is the right response from Bausch & Lomb? From the retailers? What do you like or dislike about the response from Bausch & Lomb? From the retailers?

A slight complication appears. The government and news media report that similar outbreaks of Fusarium keratitis hit Singapore and Hong Kong in November of 2006. Bausch & Lomb voluntarily suspended sales of ReNu with MoistureLoc in those countries. Does that change your response at all if you are Bausch & Lomb?

Reputation Management

Reputations are threatened during any crisis. Research in marketing and public relations has begun to explore how crisis response strategies can be used to protect a reputation during a crisis (Coombs & Holladay, 2004, 2005; Dean, 2004). The belief is that communication (words and actions) affects how stakeholders perceive the organization.
in crisis (Allen & Caillouet, 1994; Benoit, 1995, 1997; Hearit, 1994, 1996, 2001). A variety of crisis responses strategies have been identified by researchers (e.g., Allen & Caillouet, 1994; Benoit, 1995). The crisis situation is recognized as an important influence in the selection of the crisis response strategy (Benson, 1988; Bradford & Garrett, 1995; Coombs, 1995; Hobbs, 1995). The key is in knowing when to use a particular response strategy. The problem has been in understanding when to use a particular strategy for a specific crisis situation. Attribution theory has been offered as a useful framework for fitting the crisis response to the crisis situation (e.g., Bradford & Garrett, 1995; Coombs, 1995, 2004a; Dean, 2004).

The Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) is part of a growing body of research that applies attribution theory to crisis management (Ahluwalia, Burnkrant, & Unnava, 2000; Dawar & Pillutla, 2000; Dean, 2004; Folkes, Koletsky, & Graham, 1987; Härtel, McColl-Kennedy, & McDonald, 1998). In public relations, the SCCT has used attribution theory to develop and test a set of recommendations for using crisis response strategies. Attribution theory is premised on the belief that people assign responsibility for negative, unexpected events (Weiner, 1986). Clearly, crises are unexpected and negative, so they provoke attributions of responsibility. In turn, these attributions shape how a stakeholder feels and behaves toward the organization. SCCT utilizes attribution theory to evaluate the reputational threat posed by the crisis situation and then recommends crisis response strategies based upon the reputational threat level.

To appreciate the SCCT recommendations, we need to define a set of crisis response strategies and explain how the reputational threat posed by a crisis is assessed.

**CRISIS RESPONSE STRATEGIES**

Crisis response strategies represent the actual responses an organization uses to address a crisis. As has been mentioned, communication has both verbal and nonverbal aspects. Hence, crisis response strategies involve the words (verbal aspects) and actions (nonverbal aspects) the organization directs toward the crisis (Allen & Caillouet, 1994; Benoit, 1995).

Crisis response strategies were first examined as apologia or the use of communication to defend one’s reputation from public attack (Ware & Linkugel, 1973). Since crises threaten reputations, it was believed that organizations would use apologia to defend their

But apologia offered a rather limited number of crisis response strategies, and a belief grew that strategies other than those found in apologia were being used in crisis responses. The number of crisis response strategies was expanded by examining the concept of accounts. Accounts are statements people use to explain their behavior when that behavior is called into question. A crisis response can be a form of account. Similar to apologia, accounts involve protecting one’s reputation from a threat (Benoit, 1995).

Benoit (1995, 1997) has developed a list of 14 “image restoration strategies” based on apologia and account research. Allen and Caillouet (1994) used impression management and accounts to develop a list of 20 “impression management strategies” an organization might use. Impression management is based on the idea that communication can be used to strategically shape the public reputation of an organization. Organizations use the “impression management strategies,” what I term crisis response strategies, to repair reputational damage from a crisis.

Trying to specify the exact number of crisis response strategies is a losing proposition (Benoit, 1995). A more productive approach is to identify the most common strategies and to organize them in some useful fashion. A list of 10 common crisis communication strategies was derived by selecting those that appeared on two or more lists developed by crisis experts. These 10 strategies are defined in Table 8.1.

SCCT organizes crisis response strategies by determining if the intent of the strategy is to change perceptions of the crisis or of the organization in crisis. The strategies have been grouped into four postures, clusters of strategies that stakeholders perceive as similar to one another (Coombs, 2006b), as shown in Table 8.1. The denial strategies seek to remove any connection between the crisis and the organization. An organization will not be affected by a crisis if it is not involved in or responsible for the crisis. The denial posture includes attacking the accuser, denial, and scapegoating strategies. The diminishment strategies attempt to reduce attributions of organizational control over the crisis or the negative effects of the crisis. If the attributions for control of the crisis are viewed less negatively, the reputational threat to the organization is reduced. The diminishment posture includes the excusing and justification strategies. The rebuilding strategies try to improve the organization’s reputation. Words are said and actions are taken designed to benefit stakeholders and to offset the negative effects of the
crisis. The rebuilding strategies include compensation and full apology. Apology is a complicated response, so Box 8.1 provides additional details. The denial, diminishment, and rebuilding postures also represent varying degrees of accommodation, the amount of concern the
response shows for victims. It reflects the amount of responsibility an organization is perceived to have accepted for the crisis (Coombs, 2006b).

**Box 8.1 The Apology**

Apology is the most complex and perhaps controversial of the crisis response strategies. It is critical to differentiate between full and partial responses. A full apology must acknowledge the crisis, accept responsibility, include a promise not to repeat the crisis, and express concern and regret (Kellerman, 2006). A partial apology is typically just an expression of concern and regret. Why the split? The answer is legal liability. Accepting responsibility results in organizations losing lawsuits related to the crisis. If an organization says it is responsible, it must pay in court. As noted earlier, the expression of concern or regret does not carry the same liabilities (Cohen, 2002). A person must be careful when using the term *apology*. That is why full apology is specified and treated as separate from an expression of concern.

The bolstering strategies are supplemental to the other three postures. The bolstering strategies also seek to build a positive connection between the organization and the stakeholders. This posture includes the reminding, ingratiation, and victimage strategies. These three strategies focus on the organization, so they would seem rather egocentric if used alone, which is why they are considered supplemental.

**Evaluating Reputational Threat**

Three factors are used in SCCT to evaluate the reputational threat presented by a crisis: crisis type, crisis history, and prior reputation. These three factors are applied in a two-step process. The first step is to determine the crisis type, the frame that is used to interpret the crisis (see Chapter 5 to review the list of crisis types or frames used in SCCT). Research has found that each crisis type creates predictable attributions of crisis responsibility among stakeholders (Coombs & Holladay, 2002). Table 8.2 organizes the frames according to the levels of crisis responsibility they evoke. The Victim cluster produces very little crisis responsibility for the organization. Stakeholders see the organization as a victim of the crisis, not the cause of the crisis. The Accident cluster produces low attributions of organizational crisis responsibility. The crises are seen as largely uncontrollable by the organization and unintentional.
The Preventable cluster produces very strong attributions of organizational crisis responsibility. The organization willfully engaged in behaviors that led to the crisis (Coombs, 2005; Coombs & Holladay, 2001).

Crisis responsibility can be a threat to an organization’s reputation because stronger attributions of crisis responsibility produce greater reputational damage (Coombs, 2004b; Coombs & Holladay, 1996; 2004). To determine the crisis type, look to see what cues are present and being used to describe the crisis. Most crises will fall easily into one of the crisis types. If the crisis type is ambiguous, the crisis team can attempt to shape which frame is selected. However, it is possible that the crisis team and stakeholders may disagree on the crisis type. If this is the case, the crisis team should seriously consider adopting the stakeholder’s frame.

The second step in assessing the reputational threat is to modify the initial assessment, based upon crisis history and prior reputation. If an organization has had similar crises in the past, the current crisis will be a much greater reputational threat (Coombs, 2004a; Coombs & Holladay, 2004). The crisis history compounding the threat of the current crisis is known as the Velcro effect (Coombs & Holladay, 2002; Klein & Dawar, 2004). Similarly, an unfavorable prior reputation intensifies the reputational threat as well (Coombs & Holladay, 2006).

### Table 8.2 Crisis Types, by Level of Responsibility

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Victim Cluster: Very little attribution of crisis responsibility</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Natural disasters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rumors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Workplace violence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Malevolence</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Accidental Crisis Cluster: Low attribution of crisis responsibility</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Challenges</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technical-error accidents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technical-error product harm</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Preventable Crisis Cluster: Strong attributions of crisis responsibility</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Human-error accidents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Human-error product harm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organizational misdeeds</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 8.3 SCCT Recommendations for Crisis Response Selection

1. Provide instructing information to all victims or potential victims in the form of warnings and directions for protecting themselves from harm.
2. Provide adjusting information to victims by expressing concern for them and providing corrective action when possible.
   Note: Providing instructing and adjusting information is enough of a response for victim crises with no crisis history or unfavorable prior reputation.
3. Use diminishment strategies for accident crises when there is no crisis history or unfavorable prior reputation.
4. Use diminishment strategies for victim crises when there is a crisis history or unfavorable prior reputation.
5. Use rebuilding strategies for accident crises when there is a crisis history or unfavorable prior reputation.
7. Use denial strategies in rumor crises.
8. Use denial strategies in challenges when the challenge is unwarranted.
9. Use corrective action (adjusting information) in challenges when other stakeholders are likely to support the challenge.
10. Use reinforcing strategies as supplements to the other response strategies.
11. Victimage response strategy should only be used with the victim cluster.
12. To be consistent, do not mix denial strategies with either the diminishment or rebuilding strategies.
13. Diminishment and rebuilding strategies can be used in combination with one another.

So what does this really mean? If an organization has a history of crises or a negative prior reputation, stakeholders will treat a victim crisis like an accidental crisis and an accidental crisis like an intentional one. In turn, crisis managers must adjust which crisis response strategies to use (Coombs, 2006a; Coombs & Holladay, 2002).

Once the reputational threat is assessed, the crisis team selects the recommended crisis response strategy. SCCT posits that as the reputational threat increases, crisis teams should use more accommodative strategies. Research using nonvictim stakeholders has found support for the SCCT-recommended strategies (Coombs & Holladay, 1996; 2004). Table 8.3 lists the crisis response recommendations from SCCT.

It is important to understand how stakeholders perceive crises and crisis response strategies. SCCT takes an audience-centered approach to crisis communication, considering how stakeholders react to the crisis situation and crisis response strategies. SCCT goes far beyond the typical case study approach to crisis communication that many feel...
has limited the field’s development (Ahluwalia et al., 2000; Coombs & Schmidt, 2000).

With the threat to lives and property presented by a crisis, a focus on reputation may seem shallow. SCCT acknowledges that people are the first priority in a crisis. Only after instructing and adjusting information is provided should crisis managers turn their attention to reputation concerns. Reputation protection is a valuable aspect of crisis communication. Organizations invest a substantial amount of money and effort into building reputations.

**Effects of Credibility and Prior Reputation on Crisis Response Strategies**

Two additional points must be considered when discussing the crisis response strategies because they affect their use: credibility and prior reputation. As noted previously, credibility is composed of expertise and trustworthiness. Expertise is the organization’s knowledge about the subject. An expert organization will appear to be competent, capable, and effective (Kouzes & Posner, 1993). Trustworthiness is the organization’s goodwill toward or concern for its stakeholders. A trustworthy organization is truthful and ethical and considers how its actions will affect its stakeholders (Allen & Caillouet, 1994; Kouzes & Posner, 1993).

Although not referred to directly, credibility is an underlying theme in much of the crisis management literature. Two common refrains noted by crisis experts are that an organization must (1) establish control during a crisis and (2) show compassion during a crisis (e.g., Carney & Jorden, 1993; Frank, 1994; Sen & Egelhoff, 1991). When examining what is meant by control and compassion, a strong similarity is found to the expertise and trustworthiness dimensions of credibility. Control includes having accurate and complete information about the crisis (Bergman, 1994; Caruba, 1994; Kempner, 1995). Having information shows that the organization is an expert about the crisis. Compassion means showing concern and sensitivity for those affected by the crisis (Higbee, 1992; Mitchell, 1986). Compassion is consistent with trustworthiness. People trust those who seem to have their own best interests in mind. Thus, crisis experts have indirectly argued the importance of credibility during crisis management.

Believability is essential during any type of crisis event because there always can be competing interpretations. For this reason, crisis experts repeatedly emphasize that an organization must get its side of the story or version of the crisis out quickly (e.g., Heath, 1994;
Kempner, 1995). However, this advice has a hidden premise—it is assumed that stakeholders will believe what the organization says. The importance of believability is heightened when the crisis hinges on the stakeholders choosing between competing versions of the crisis story. In some crises, the accepted version will determine the success of the crisis management effort and affect the amount of damage inflicted by the crisis. Challenges and rumors are two types of crises which rest on the selection of competing crisis stories (Lerbinger, 1997). A closer look at challenges and rumors will clarify the importance of credibility to crisis management.

A challenge occurs when a stakeholder calls an organization’s actions into question. The stakeholder claims that the organization is acting in ways that are inappropriate. Other stakeholders must decide whether to accept the claim of wrongdoing or to accept the organization’s claim that its actions are appropriate (Lerbinger, 1997). Challenges are marked by ambiguity; there are some reasons why both sides may be correct. The ambiguity stems from the challenges being based either on morals or questions of product or service quality. A moral challenge is tied to some set of moral principles, such as a code of conduct. The U.N. Global Compact that recommends universal social and environment principles for companies is an example of such a code. A moral challenge does not involve the violation of any law or regulation. What is violated is a set of standards some stakeholders believe the organization should adhere to. Some examples include not buying furs because of the inhumane treatment of animals or not buying oil from Nigeria because of the Nigerian government’s human rights abuses. The potential for a moral challenge is great since the world is composed of many diverse groups with conflicting views of appropriate conduct. During a moral challenge, stakeholders support the side that is the most believable or credible to them.

A quality of product or service challenge derives its ambiguity from how the data that measure quality are interpreted or from competing data sets that lead to different conclusions about the product or service quality. The Audi 5000 sudden-acceleration case exemplifies the ambiguity that can be associated with interpreting quality data. For a number of years, Audi 5000 drivers reported that the car would suddenly jump into gear and run. Sometimes there were deadly consequences, when people were unlucky enough to be in a vehicle’s path at the time of the jump. Many customers defined the situation as a quality problem, a fault in the design of the Audi 5000’s transmission system. Audi maintained that there was no reliable evidence that the transmission was faulty. Instead, Audi blamed the incidents on bad
drivers. No definitive evidence supported either story; it all depended on how one interpreted the events. Eventually the 5000 was recalled and an antilocking device installed. Audi still maintained there was no problem, but stakeholders, including potential car buyers, found the Audi customers to have the more believable and credible story (Versical, 1987). Unless there is a government action, such as a recall or a jury decision in a lawsuit, challenges based upon quality are resolved by stakeholders selecting the story they feel comes from the most credible source and acting accordingly.

Rumors represent another form of crisis where believability is essential. A rumor occurs when an untruthful statement about an organization is circulated. The Snapple Beverage Company was hit by rumors that it supported the Ku Klux Klan and that the label on its popular ice tea drink depicted a slave ship. The rumor was centered in San Francisco, and Snapple launched a costly media campaign to combat the rumor. The trigger for the rumor seemed to be the kosher mark that Snapple, like hundreds of other companies, placed on its bottles (Gellene, 1993). The charges were false, and the organization spent thousands of dollars to correct the lies. Rumor experts recommend that organizations respond immediately to rumors by stating that the information is untrue and unjust (Gross, 1990). Once more, a premium is placed on the credibility and believability of the organization. Defusing a rumor requires that the organization be perceived as a credible channel of information—the stakeholders must believe that the organization is a source of accurate information. The organization must be more credible than the rumor.

The benefit of credibility is that it increases the believability of an organization’s message. The more credible the organization, the more likely stakeholders are to believe and to accept the organization’s definition of the crisis, to believe the organization’s side of the story. A second characteristic of a favorable precrisis organization–stakeholder relationship would be stakeholders viewing the organization as credible.

An organization’s reputation overlaps with credibility but is considered a separate construct. An organization’s prior reputation can be likened to a bank account (an organizational bank that contains reputational capital). A favorable reputation builds up the account while a crisis subtracts from the account. Under certain limited circumstances (Coombs & Holladay, 2006), a favorable reputation can act as a shield to protect an organization from harm. In most cases, however, a crisis will inflict reputational damage, the loss of reputational capital.

An organization with a favorable reputation can experience stakeholders ignoring bad news about the organization because they are
unlikely to believe that a good organization did anything bad. Crises can be one of the forms of bad news that is deflected by a strong reputation. The disbelief gives the organization the benefit of doubt during the initial phases of a crisis, which provides two advantages. First, it supplies a buffer against people assuming the worst. In a crisis, the worst is when stakeholders believe the organization is responsible for the crisis. A strong account suffers less from the withdrawals of a crisis. A favorable precrisis reputation means that an organization has reputational capital to spend, unlike those that are unknown or disliked.

While most people are quick to believe the worst about organizations, a favorable reputation can lead stakeholders to believe the best. In turn, this means the stakeholders would not jump to negative conclusions about the crisis. This position would be reevaluated once the facts about the crisis begin to emerge. A favorable reputation may also afford protection from the negative speculation that crises often produce. Negative speculation refers to the nonexpert opinions that often fill the information void created by a crisis. Organizations are wise to respond immediately to prevent this void. However, negative speculation may come more quickly than the facts during a crisis (Carney & Jorden, 1993). The negative speculation feeds into people’s willingness to assume the worst about organizations, particularly corporations. A favorable reputation counters the negative speculation and the willingness to believe the worst. A favorable reputation should lead stakeholders to discount the negative speculation and to believe the best about an organization until that belief is proven to be unfounded. The stakeholders are predisposed to wait to hear the organization’s side of the story before drawing conclusions about the crisis. A strong, favorable, precrisis organization–stakeholder relationship shields the organization from undue reputational harm and makes it easier for the organization to deliver its side of the story.

**FOLLOW-UP COMMUNICATION**

With all the emphasis on initial response, it is easy to overlook follow-up communication with stakeholders. But crisis communication should continue throughout the life cycle of the crisis. Crisis teams must stay in touch with stakeholders. While the initial response has a mass media emphasis, follow-up communication can be better targeted to individual stakeholders. Better targeting means using the channels best suited to reaching particular stakeholder and tailoring the message to fit their unique needs (Carney & Jorden, 1993; Clampitt, 1991;
For instance, major investors may learn about a crisis from the news media. Follow-up communication to investors would center on their primary concern, the financial implications of the crisis, and use either calls or specially printed updates from the investor relations department. The external stakeholder network from the Crisis Knowledge Map Directory is valuable at this point. As noted in Chapter 7, the external stakeholder network will have the necessary contact information and preferred channels for reaching the stakeholders.

In addition to answering new inquiries, follow-up communication involves delivering any promised information and updating the stakeholders about new developments. As noted earlier, there are times when crisis managers do not have answers to stakeholder questions and do best to promise to pass the information along as soon as they receive it (Stewart & Cash, 1997). It is essential that the crisis team fulfill these promises. The crisis team must report to the stakeholders, even if it is only to say that the information was never found. Credibility and organizational reputation are built on matching words and deeds (Herbig, Milewicz, & Golden, 1994). The crisis managers’ words include their promises, and their actions fulfill those promises. An organization loses credibility and damages the organization–stakeholder relationships when crisis managers fail to deliver on their information promises.

Updates inform stakeholders about the progress of the crisis management effort. Four pieces of information are crucial to updates. First, let stakeholders know how the recovery effort is progressing. Second, announce the cause of the crisis as soon as it is known, if the cause was not known at the time of the initial message. Third, inform stakeholders of any actions taken to prevent a repeat of the crisis, including when those changes have been implemented. Fourth, report to stakeholders any third-party support your organization is receiving. Third-party support means that outside groups are praising your crisis management efforts or agreeing with your assessment of the situation. Examples include noted crisis experts giving the crisis management effort a positive review in the news media or the government saying the organization’s stated cause of the crisis is correct. Supplying these four kinds of information builds the credibility of the organization. Items 1, 2, and 3 reinforce a perception of control, while Item 4 provides added credibility with the endorsement of an outside expert.

Three final points about follow-up communication must be made. First, the spokespersons and crisis team should continue to field and to respond to inquiries throughout the crisis. The crisis team must track
and answer all inquiries. Second, the spokesperson should continue to express compassion in the follow-up communications. Losing sight of the victims in later messages can call the initial concern into question. Was the organization simply posturing in the news media? The organizational compassion must be real and be reflected in the follow-up communication. Follow-up includes both words and actions (Bergman, 1994; Mitchell, 1986). If aid is promised to victims, make sure it appears. Third, employee assistance programs should continue monitoring and treating negative reactions to the traumatic event. Once more, tracking crisis information is critical. The crisis team should be recording what follow-up actions were promised on the Stakeholder Relations Worksheets. Again, credibility is based on the organization’s words matching its actions.

### University Application: Stakeholders

Fires are one of the primary risks faced by universities. When you have buildings, they can catch fire. Seton Hall was hit by a deadly dorm fire in the late 1990s, and my own campus had a classroom building fire during class time. In a crisis, such as a building fire, who are the likely key stakeholders for your university? Does it matter if the fire is in a dorm or a classroom building? Why or why not? What options does the university have for contacting these stakeholders? What challenges would the university face in trying to communicate with these stakeholders?

### CONCLUSION

The actions taken in the crisis response phase are informed by the crisis-related information and knowledge gathered during the crisis recognition phase. The crisis team seeks to contain the damage and to return to business as usual as soon as possible. Communication is essential to limiting the duration of the crisis because it is at the heart of the initial response, reputational management, informing stakeholders, and providing follow-up information. The initial response allows the crisis team to reestablish a sense of organizational control over events and to express compassion for victims. Taking early control of the crisis prevents rumors and speculation from needlessly intensifying the crisis damage. Moreover, the response must be quick and consistent while the organization remains open to communication with stakeholders.
Crisis communication is ideal for combating the reputational damage associated with a crisis. Crisis response strategies affect how stakeholders perceive the crisis and the organization in crisis. In addition, the crisis itself limits the type of crisis response strategies that can be used effectively. Crisis managers should select the crisis response strategies that fit best with their particular crisis situation. SCCT provides guidelines, not absolute rules, to help crisis managers select the most effective responses for protecting reputational assets in a given crisis situation. The Business Continuity Plan allows an organization to function during a crisis and to return to business as usual more quickly. Crisis managers must communicate to relevant stakeholders how the continuity plan affects their interaction with the organization. In addition to the initial response, crisis managers have a variety of follow-up information they must communicate to stakeholders, including delivery of previously promised information and updates regarding the progress of the crisis management efforts. The ongoing organization–stakeholder dialogue continues throughout the crisis management process.

Regular, two-way communication between the organization and the stakeholder is the life blood of a favorable organizational-stakeholder relationship. The dialogue must be maintained during good times and bad. Crises are part of the bad times. Remembering the importance of communicating with stakeholders aids the crisis management team in its efforts to contain and to recover from the crisis.

**DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

1. What are the advantages and disadvantages of using full apologies during a crisis? Do you think partial apologies have any real value? Why or why not?

2. As a crisis manager, how can you prepare for using instructing and adjusting information prior to a crisis?

3. Why does attribution theory seem so fitting for crisis communication?

4. What other crisis types would you add to Table 8.2?