Lesson 1: Listen or Lose Control

Pitfall: sending messages without tuning in

Sex parties in Haiti

"We murdered babies in their cots?" This is a quote from the CEO of Oxfam UK in a reaction to the news that his coworkers organized sex parties in Haiti. Oxfam is a global NGO who help fight hunger and stimulate fair trade. Oxfam was present in Haiti after the giant earthquakes of 2010 to help rebuild the country. In 2018 reports started to come out that Oxfam employees held sex parties during that period for which they hired local prostitutes. The press wrote about orgies in which girls walked around in Oxfam T-shirts.

Oxfam CEO Mark Goldring said that the reactions were out of proportion. In an infamous interview with *The Guardian* he gave the statement that they didn't 'murder babies in their cots'. It doesn't require much explanation that Goldring's communication didn't connect with the perception of the rest of the world. Oxfam paid a steep price for the bad reaction to this crisis. Switzerland stopped its financing of the NGO, it was temporarily banned from being active in Haiti, and Desmond Tutu resigned as an ambassador for the organization.

Mark Goldring and Oxfam could have the opinion that things weren't so bad with this crisis, but it is never up to the organization involved to determine this by themselves. Their surroundings will determine if it is a crisis or not. And good crisis communication should always stay connected to that external perception. Therefor the first essential step of crisis communication is to internalize the

perception of the outside world. You do this by making a so-called 'external image'. This external image will provide a summary of the perception of the outside world. And you can then compare it with the perception that is felt within the inner world: your organization, the crisis team, and possibly the crisis partners.

"It is up to the outside world to determine if a situation is a crisis or not."

The circles of outside and inside perception

We developed these circles to compare the inside and outside worlds. I will discuss four possible situations between inside and outside worlds.
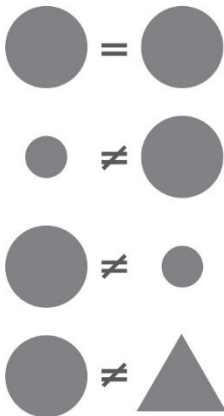
We will start with the first situation, with left a large circle and right also a large circle. In other words, the inside world thinks this is a large crisis and the outside world also thinks this is a large crisis. The 9/11 terrorist attacks in New York City in 2001 are an extreme example. On that day, as airplanes crashed into the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center, President George W. Bush did not think: "That's all fine, but I'll focus on my sustainability policy vision for 2020–2040." The internal world regarded this as a huge crisis. And so did the external world — people across the United States and around the globe recognized the magnitude of the event. Nobody thought: "Sending all those fire trucks and police cars to Lower Manhattan — isn't that a bit exaggerated?"

In the second situation, we see that the perception of the inside world is that things aren't so bad, while the outside world thinks this is a large crisis. Asbestos is a good example. Health experts are saying that the situation with asbestos isn't that bad and that it takes several years of exposure to experience the effects of an increased chance of getting cancer. But the people in the neighborhood have already packed

their bags and have collectively left the area. Radiation and nuclear powerplants have similar effects. Experts claim that the risks are small, but the general audience has a different view. This situation of 'inside small, outside large' is often seen in health crises and toxic substances.

In the third situation, the inside world thinks this is a large crisis, but the outside world doesn't. When I ask participants of my trainings if the term 'DigiNotar crisis' from 2011 means anything to them, maybe one of every ten people will raise their hand. Whilst this situation required the largest crisis escalation level in the Netherlands between the nuclear disaster in Chernobyl in 1986 and the COVID pandemic in 2020. But it was a complex crisis to understand. At the time, I worked in the crisis team at the Dutch department of Public Health, Welfare, and Sports. And to be honest, I had worked on the crisis all day, but when seeing the news at 8 I finally understood what really was going on.

The Dutch IT company DigiNotar supplied safety certificates for the majority of the Netherlands, enabling computers to mutually check whether their connections are secure. Iranian hackers had hacked DigiNotar, which required Microsoft to perform software updates to deem all DigiNotar certificates as unsafe. As a consequence, ATM computers would no longer be able to communicate with computers at the banks, because an insecure link would mean that they could no longer exchange information. The ATM machine could no longer check if someone making a withdrawal had enough money in their account. And an ordering terminal at the local supermarket could no longer communicate with a distribution center, health care insurance could not communicate with a hospital, and the government could no longer pay out financial aid for students and pensioners. So it had a huge social impact. It was the first item of the evening news, it was on the front page of the papers, and yet hardly anyone still remembers it. For the outside world this was a small circle, a small crisis.

The minister pulled off an amazing achievement in making sure that Microsoft would not update the computers for an entire country. It was the very first time in

the history of Microsoft that a single country was excluded from an update. The Dutch were granted three weeks to replace all DigiNotar certificates, which was completed in the nick of time. Should they have been unsuccessful, communication would have become a real challenge. Imagine if people would had to withdraw cash money in order to be able to buy their groceries for two weeks, they would have to regard this as a big crisis. Otherwise, it's difficult to mobilize people and prepare for the worst. In that case, the communication department had to work hard to make the circle of outside perception much larger. When people don't realize the urgency of the situation they will never act.

The situation 'large crisis inside, small crisis outside' is often seen with IT-crises, though that has changed the last couple of years due to the increased general interest for cyber crises and IT. And a similar situation can also happen when asbestos is involved. The mayor of Utrecht had to deal with asbestos pollution in a neighborhood in 2012. While he made plans to have the entire area evacuated (large circle), the residents were making jokes about it. "I have spent twenty years sawing asbestos, so I am not leaving for a little bit more of that stuff." Hence, a small circle.

It isn't strictly necessary for the circles to be of similar size, but as a crisis team you should always be aware of the differences in the circles of the outside and inside worlds. And that is where the communication advisor provides an 'external image'.

That leaves us with one final situation. A large circle from the inside world and a large triangle from the outside world. I have a wonderful example when I contributed to the visit of the US President Barack Obama to the city of Amsterdam in 2014. We had been preparing in secrecy for weeks and the situation required extreme security measures. Obama would land with a helicopter at one of Amsterdam's most prominent squares and everybody who lived adjacent to the square would be required to keep their windows closed and could not step onto their own balconies. Police would knock on the door of anyone who failed to meet

these requirements with the urgent request to immediately close their window or step inside from their balcony.

We thought this was all rather exciting. Would the outspoken local residents put up with these restrictions? While the presidential visit was underway, we received these types of messages from the neighborhood: "How wonderful that this can take place in our backyards." We had a press release ready to send out for when Obama would have left, saying "Visit Obama proceeded safely", but while we read the messages from the outside world, while all of the Netherlands marveled at the images of the event and of the three helicopters circling the Amsterdam square, and while Obama stood admiring *De Nachtwacht* by Rembrandt, we reread our own press release. And we realized that this message made no sense at all. The outside world isn't concerned at all with whether the situation is safe, that is just our own tunnel vision. The outside world is enjoying a party. The old press release was deleted and replaced with a new press release with the title "Obama visits Amsterdam with beautiful sunshine".

This happens often with crisis teams during events. They perceive the situation with their safety view (large circle) while the rest of the audience perceives it as a party (large triangle).

I noticed a similar situation with a client who managed several trampoline parks. In 2018 there was a massive fire at a shopping mall in Siberia where 37 people were killed. My client called me because they had heard that the fire had broken out in a *foam pit* — I had to Google what that was, a large pit filled with foam blocks to play in. They also had a foam pit and they were afraid that there would be concerns whether their play space was safe. They had good intentions of course and I liked how they wanted to communicate proactively about this situation. But I advised them to first take a look at the external image. What was going on and what were people talking about? It was a crisis literally on the other side of the world and reports talked about blocked fire doors and the number of casualties, but the foam pit was hardly mentioned. It wasn't necessary to start communicating

immediately, it would be sufficient to monitor whether the safety of foam pits would later become a topic in the Netherlands.

Principle 2: Being open, honest, and transparent

'Full disclosure' is what it's called in the US. Everything that can come out, will come out. Being open means that you always share the negative information with the world on your own accord. And that you share everything that you know and not just a part of the whole story. Being honest means that you do not lie. Lying implies not just telling untrue stories, but also exaggeration or consciously leaving out a part of the truth knowing that it's an important aspect. And transparency means you lift the veil to give a view of what is going on behind the curtain. There is usually a lot going on when an organization is dealing with a crisis, but the outside world will only see a glimpse of this. We can tell so much more about what we are doing to contain a crisis. Show people what goes on behind the scenes. Crisis teams do great work most of the time, but forget that the press and public are not aware of this, even though they are genuinely interested.

A good example is the transparency regarding the construction of the north-south subway line through Amsterdam between 2003 and 2018. The entire project had a bad reputation due to prolapsing buildings, angry residents, a delay of seven years, and a budget overrun of over one billion euros. All the media attention this project received was focused on the crises and incidents.

A few new people in the communication department started to change course. From now on they started to communicate with transparency about the challenges and other aspects of the project. A large construction worker with a helmet on stood in front of a tall drilling machine and said: "I am drilling here in jelly." They shared images of divers who had to anchor tunnel parts in the riverbed. Slowly the media started to talk about other things than just the negative things, but also about the challenges and the things that went well.

A lesson from China: McDonalds versus Kentucky Fried Chicken

Professor Yi-Hui Christine Huang has done a lot of research on crisis communication in countries like China and Taiwan. While China does not have a reputation for transparency, but the conclusion is that even there it is best to be quick, open, and transparent. At the International Crisis and Risk Communication Conference in Orlando, Florida, Professor Huang told about the four coping mechanisms. These deal with what the person or organization involved will communicate with the outside world.

1. Denial. Denying the event happened or denying that the person or organization is the cause of the event.

2. Trivialize. Downplaying the event, blaming others, it wasn't us, the person or organization accused is not responsible, because they not prevent this event, due to that certain aspects limited the control over this event.

3. Justification. The person or organization is responsible for the event, but the norm used by the accusers with which they judge the event is valse. This also concerns messages that emphasize the positive features of the person or organization involved and redefining the facts and reframing the facts in another context.

4. Pleading guilty in hindsight. Having to apologize profusely and taking extreme measures, acknowledge that the event has taken place and that you are fully responsible, had control over the situation, and that the norms used by the accusers are correct. This also includes the messages in which apologies are offered, forgiveness is asked, and measure are being taken to prevent the event happening again.

The last strategy is almost always being chosen in the end. But many organizations first go through phases of denial, trivialization, justification, and finally pleading guilty and offering apologies. If you always have to plead guilty and apologize in

the end you can safe a lot of time, money, and energy by doing so upfront and skip the first three steps of the model.

Professor Huang illustrated the coping mechanisms by the reactions of McDonalds and Kentucky Fried Chicken on allegations of selling spoiled foods in China. The study examined the effects of the crisis communication by McDonalds and KFC in four food scandals between 2012 and 2014. In these cases the sector, crisis type, culture, and time periods were the same, but the reactions and consequences of these reactions were completely different.

These crises mainly dealt with various unhygienic practices with meat. A Chinese news channel discovered that a local meat processing company would repackage old meat and stamp it with a more recent date. In some cases the meat was a year out of date. At this supplier meat that had fallen on the floor was also being picked up and used. Both McDonalds and Yum, the mother company of KFC, used their meat for the Chinese market. This news dominated social media in China.

In the case studies on McDonalds we see a quick reaction of the fast food chain in which they apologize immediately. In 2012 McDonalds reacted within thirty minutes after the broadcast showing images that outdated food was used at a McDonalds restaurant. The apologized within ninety minutes. After a scandal in 2014 they allowed customers and press into their kitchens. McDonalds often used social media like Weibo, the Chinese equivalent of Twitter/X, to react proactively. They openly apologized, took responsibility, and promised improvements. These swift and transparent reactions led to positive perception of the brand with its customers.

On the other hand, KFC reacted slow, evasive, and issued vague statements. During a scandal in 2012 with a supplier of chicken meat KFC initially reacted with denial and in defense of the supplier. This led to criticism and distrust with the public because the statements from the company did not match the visible facts. In the case of the meat scandal in 2014 it took KFC weeks before they issued an official

apology. This all led to damages to the brand, negative perceptions, and criticism from the public.

In Orlando, professor Huang told that McDonalds took the right approach to communicate openly and transparent, and acknowledged that mistakes had been made. It shares even went up during this period. Various influential people took to social media to speak out in support of McDonalds and some of them even said that their trust in McDonalds had grown. Because of McDonalds reactions in 2012, opinion polls showed that 80 percent of the people still trusted in the fast food chain. While KFC denied and made the damage to their brand so much bigger. It probably caused a 26 percent lower turnover for Yum in China and its share fells with 63 percent, probably also due to the effects of concerns over the bird flu. KFC and Yum felt the negative consequences even a year later.

These cases illustrate how a quick and open crisis communication can contribute to the restoration of trust, while a slow and evasive reaction can further damage an organization.

The Evolutionary Advantage of Gossip

Why do we remember the negative better than the positive? We need to zoom in on the brain for this. People use different parts of the brain for positive and negative emotions. The positive is positioned more to the front of the brain, while the negative — the amygdala — sits deeper and further behind. The outer parts of the brain are evolutionary younger than the inner parts. That is why we call the most primitive parts of the brain the 'reptilian brain'.

Research has shown that we are better at remembering a negative message than a positive message with equal importance. That is why people love to gossip, which is predominantly about negative things. Our brain is wired so that we have a better memory for negative points.

To explain this we first need to take a look at evolution. Charles Darwin explained that evolution is about 'survival of the fittest', and with 'fittest' we mean the one who is best equipped to survive, who is the most successful in generation offspring, and can spread his genes. 'Fittest' is not about being the strongest, but about being the best at spreading your genes. By spreading more genes than others, your genes will be more present. Evolution is a very slow process, but if certain features or behavior yields slightly better results it will increase over time. If certain genes increase the length of your neck just a little, making the higher leaves accessible to you, it will lead — over many generations — to the genesis of the giraffe. If you look at this minute changes from an evolutionary perspective, you will see that the people who have adopted these changes have a slightly better survival rate, reach a higher age, and reproduce a little bit more. Over a period of thousands or millions of years people with these changes will become dominant. And if the changes have a negative effect on survival and reproduction you will see that the numbers with these specific changes will decrease.

Perhaps there have been prehistoric groups of ancestors who were better at remembering positive messages and groups who were better at remembering negative messages. But the theory is that sharing negative messages has a better

evolutionary advantage than sharing positive messages. It is more important to avoid negative aspects of life than seek up the positive aspects. If something bad happens to you — you meet a wild lion on the savannah — it will require a large amount of energy to recover. But if you miss something good — a tree that bears tasty nuts — the lack of a positive effect has a smaller impact. This is really just a form of risk aversion. In short, sharing and remembering negative things enables you to keep up to date with risks and dangers and being able to avoid these has an evolutionary advantage over sharing positive news.

Now think about crises or other situations in which the organization is proactively the messenger for bad news. And think about similar situations in where the bad news comes from another organization, the media, or your next door neighbor. You will notice that you probably experience more emotions (irritation, anger, a feeling of injustice) when the news comes from a second party. It is interesting to examine the next time you see negative news on the television or read bad news in the paper what your judgement is on this news if the source is the organization that is featured in this news item, or if the source is external.

Make sure there is the least possible negative talk about you (by others), by sharing any bad news yourself, as quickly as possible, and completely (full disclosure!)