

POP: POWER OF PEOPLE



POP

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It has been and remains my firm belief that the Court of Public Opinion is the ultimate judge of the success or failure of how an organization deals with a crisis situation. That is the Power of People. Their judgment will come in large part from how effective was the communications effort. The Crisis Communication Coalition and Think Tank brings professionals and academics together to share ideas, research and opinions on best communications practices in times of crises and to serve as a resource to organizations in crisis situations.

— Dick Yarbrough

PREFACE

Power of People, Permanence of Polarization, Problem of Polarization, Prevention of Polarization, Pushback of Publics, Pressure of Perfection and Privilege of Perspective are expressed through the acronym POP in this report from the 2022 Crisis Communication Think Tank held April 14 at the University of Georgia, H. W. Grady College of Journalism and Mass Communication.

In its fourth year, the Crisis Communication Think Tank or CCTT focused its discussion on the role of relationships in crisis communication. As the first in-person meeting of CCTT members since 2019, the role and place of people and relationships were top-of-mind. It was also the first meeting since the social unrest and subsequent corporate engagement in social issues after the murder of George Floyd and the storming of the U.S. Capitol. The topics of people (versus technology), polarization, pushback, privilege and expectations of perfection are turbo-charged realities for crisis communicators.

This booklet attempts to chronicle and share the conversations and ideas that grew out of the 2022 CCTT. Presenters have summarized their ideas in short essays. Discussion leaders have distilled rich conversations within subgroups of the Think Tank. And we close with bulleted answers to big questions posed over the course of this thought-packed day. Additional resources are available at the UGA Crisis Communication Coalition website (<https://grady.uga.edu/crisis-communication-coalition/>).

*Bryan H. Reber, Ph.D.
C. Richard Yarbrough Professor of Crisis Communication Leadership
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INTRODUCTION



Bringing together academics and practitioners studying and practicing crisis in various fields, this gathering aimed to dive deeper into research surrounding crisis practice, theory and education. As the first in-person gathering since 2019, “Power of People” (POP) sought to bridge the gap between the ever-evolving groups and ideologies in contemporary society. “POP” and its concepts outline the nuances of crisis communication as a result of accounting for the people in these scenarios. Set up as a three-act play, this year’s CCTT gathering divided the six major “POP” concepts into Act one: Polarization, Act two: We, the People and Act three: Resolution. Oftentimes, the public relations industry at large forgets that – at the center of these issues – are real people with real goals and motivations. This year, speakers at the CCTT took these concepts as an opportunity to share their research and created a platform for members to incorporate their ideas.

Timothy Coombs opened Act one with “Permanence of Polarization,” leading a conversation surrounding Florida’s “Don’t Say Gay” bill and the backlash corporations have gotten as a result of silence and compliance. Members of the CCTT chimed in, giving their initial thoughts on what to do when something as polarizing as the aforementioned comes to light. Following Coombs, Timothy and Deanna Sellnow gave some insight on “Problem of Polarization” and how to approach crises when people have already (firmly) chosen their side. The Sellnows centered their discussion on polarization around convergence and divergence, society’s recent shift towards the latter and some tools we may use in the near future to get back to the former. Michael Greenwell later took on the “Prevention of Polarization” segment, where practitioners and academics alike discussed the steps to take to prevent the divide we’ve seen in the industry as of late. Sometime between the opening and closing of Act one, CCTT as a whole came to the conclusion that empathy, first and foremost, is the secret ingredient to lessened polarization and increased understanding of one’s own opponents, even if that means being wrong.

Going into Act two, we began discussing the “We, the People” stage of “Power of People.” Here, “Pushback of Publics” dominated the conversation by raising hypothetical outcomes when our stakeholders don’t quite agree on everything we do or say. There exists a great stress in deciding which publics to satisfy at any given time, leading to the possibility of resistance at every turn. Taylor Voges moderated this discussion, outlining the behaviors that usually manifest in these scenarios and how to prepare for/combat them when they arise. Kate LaVail followed with a conversation surrounding “Pressure of Perfection.” With a background in research and analytics, LaVail took this opportunity to demonstrate the role research plays in getting it right. With this information, we get to see what has worked in the past, what hasn’t and why, allowing us to create a cohesive framework that delivers to a majority of our stakeholders. “Privilege of Perspective,” led by Rodrigo Sierra, closed the program and gave insight into the privilege hierarchy that may exist in crisis communication decision-making. Opening with a brief survey of his own privileges, Sierra identified common titles and circumstances that allow some practitioners to be heard, received and revered better than others. Establishing the need for DE&I efforts, Sierra offered that companies must first look inward to identify first steps in flattening the workspace and affording more room for equal contribution and recognition.

Act three: Resolution and POP Takeaways was jointly participated by attendees to discuss pathways toward POP solutions in the areas of organizational crisis, public crisis and social media & emergency technology. The POP points co-created are shared as our CCTT 2022 key takeaways for crisis communication practitioners and scholars to tackle together.

Morgan Ford
Crisis Communication Intern

ACT 1: POLARIZATION

The world's current social unrest impacts organizations and lays bare the dissensus among various segments of the public and organizations where neither side is recognizing the other's legitimacy. Social unrest has partly been precipitated by historically marginalized groups being ignored and not provided opportunities to provide diverse perspectives. Many marginalized publics' perspectives have been overlooked leading to divergence where those publics do not have any purpose to agree or converge on any topic. Divergence presents a challenge for organizations because divergent publics have no desire, and often no incentive, to reach common ground, so delivering key messaging becomes difficult. There are opportunities to make strides towards convergence when companies are transparent across constituencies; acknowledging, hearing and valuing all voices. Politicization is interwoven with polarization, resulting in toxic polarization, which is occurring at an increasingly faster rate in the U.S. Media consumption silos and social groups are exacerbating the issues. Now, more than ever this disastrous junction has played out on the world stage in recent public health crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic. In the health context, organizations must consider: "the trap of being right," "the art of listening"; and the purpose of the organization's communication.

LaShonda Eaddy
Penn State University



POLARIZATION AND DISSENSUS: A REALITY FOR CORPORATE COMMUNICATORS

W. Timothy Coombs is the George T. and Gladys H. Abell Professor in Liberal Arts in the Department of Communication at Texas A&M University. He is on the Advisory Board for the Centre for Crisis & Risk Communication based in Canada.

Pernance of Polarization: In this topic, we work to navigate and understand the long-term effects of polarization. As a society that leans into division through political, social and economic ideologies, we take this opportunity to observe the lasting impact this has on our communication, as well as the steps we can take to reverse this damage.

Stakeholder expectations have a significant influence on organizational behavior and are critical to public relations and strategic communication. However, stakeholder expectations can change over time creating challenges for corporate communicators. Multiple white papers from Accenture, Porter Novelli and others have documented how stakeholders now expect corporations to address social issues such as systemic injustice and climate change. Academics have revived the concept of corporate advocacy, speaking out on issues, by arguing corporations must now speak on social issues to meet these expectations. Social media is an underlying driver for corporate advocacy because stakeholders utilize social media to pressure corporations to address social issues. Consider how stakeholders will be critical of corporations when they are slow to respond to high profile social issues such as the murder of George Floyd or state actions designed to suppress voting. Corporations risk negative evaluation from stakeholders and potential loss of relationships if they do not address social issues. Many academics have recommended being vocal about social issues.

However, speaking on social issues to meet stakeholder expectations is a much more complicated proposition than many academics have suggested. By their nature, social issues are divisive and polarizing and associated with disparate views on the social issue or preferences for the addressing the social issue. Consider how employee pressure on Disney to speak against Florida's "Don't Say Gay" legislation resulted in a governmental backlash. Corporations used to be able to count on the quiescence of stakeholders – stakeholders passively accepting corporate actions. Social media has given a new voice to activist stakeholders resulting in much less quiescence, especially for social issues that are important to stakeholders.

Social issues create dissensus, situations involving disagreement between two or more sides and a lack of consensus. Though most of corporate communication has been focused on creating consensus, social issues are about navigating dissensus. Corporate communicators must learn to operate in conditions where parties will disagree meaning some sides will be satisfied with an action while others will object to an action. Dissensus is not new; it has always

existed. Stakeholders invariably have held different interpretations of corporate actions and policies. But dissensus among stakeholders is greater with social issues and amplified by politicization. Moreover, negative effects are more visible including employee protests and consumer boycotts over social issues. Social issues are commonly viewed through a political lens (politicization) thereby intensifying their polarizing effects. Corporations will continue to face increasing polarization among stakeholders, a trend that has been building for over a decade.

There is no easy solution for navigating the dissensus created by polarization within society. One glimmer of hope is the organization's purpose, what it does and how that relates to society. Corporations can turn to their purpose when developing positions on social issues. Purpose does not create consensus, rather, purpose provides a path for consistency in corporate words and actions. Purpose can be a wayfinder for those trying to navigate the polarization driven by stakeholder expectations that corporations address social issues.



PROBLEM OF POLARIZATION: MESSAGE CONVERGENCE AND DIVERGENCE

Timothy Sellnow is a professor of strategic communication at the University of Central Florida. His research focuses on risk and crisis communication.

Deanna Sellnow is a professor of strategic communication and Assistant Director of the Nicholson School of Communication and Media at the University of Central Florida. Her research focuses on strategic instructional communication in a variety of contexts including risk, crisis and health.

Problem of Polarization: In identifying the problem of polarization, we begin to understand just how much today’s issues divide us. In this topic, we explore the ramifications of polarization and the detrimental effects it has on modern communication

Polarization among populations regarding social and political issues continues to intensify. From a public relations perspective, polarization can be problematic for organizations and entire industries when stakeholders fail to find common ground regarding controversial issues. From our perspective, polarization can be explained through the theoretical lens of convergence and divergence.

More than 50 years ago, Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca said that people with opposing viewpoints rarely disagree on every aspect of an issue¹. People are typically able to identify a degree of agreement among opposing positions through discussion. In fact, research confirms that people seek out, recognize and are persuaded by convergence regarding issues important to them. This convergence may change over time as more information becomes available. Organizations may gain support by drawing stakeholder attention to points where the organization’s position converges with other credible sources.

Conversely, sources seeking to prolong rather than resolve conflict may foster

divergence rather than convergence as the goal. This goal shift may occur when – at least in the short term – divergence actually benefits some individuals, groups, or organizations. This polarization (a.k.a. divergence) may be the desired goal – even when such divergence is problematic for most.

Distinguishing Between
Convergence and Divergence

Convergence	Divergence
Individuals actively pursue points of agreement among opposing viewpoints.	Viewpoints are reinterpreted and “argued” as complete disagreement.
Points of convergence are persuasive on issues of personal relevance.	Points of convergence are persuasive on issues of personal relevance.
Convergence can change over time.	Divergence can change over time.
Organizations can strategically emphasize convergent messages.	Organizations can strategically intensify divergent messages.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, for example, some pork production

organizations enjoyed short term profits from higher prices for products already in the supply chain while plants were being shut down and farmers were being forced to euthanize animals because they could not get them processed. These organizations stood to benefit from divergence about when and how workers at processing plants could safely return to work.

We argue that one means by which to move industries and publics from divergence back to convergence is dialogue². At best, such dialogue is a form of engaged learning where all stakeholders collaborate in finding solutions. For engaged learning to take place, the dialogue must reflect affective, cognitive and behavioral engagement.

Engaged Learning

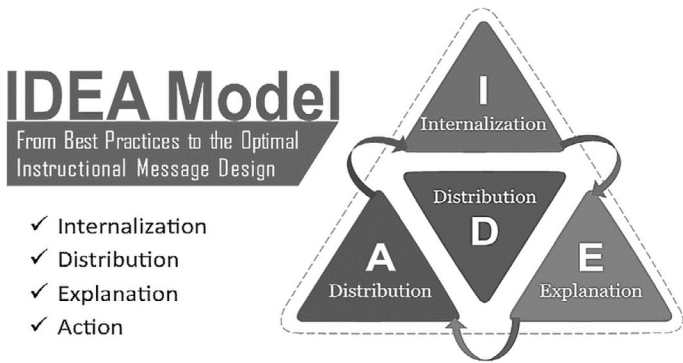
Affective Engagement	Acknowledging emotional reactions from all stakeholders (within industry and across publics).
Behavioral Engagement	Decentralize and add flexibility in plans and processes.
Cognitive Engagement	Understanding of and commitment to transparency regarding people, planet and profit.

Ultimately, we propose the IDEA model³ to inform such dialogue in ways that achieve these engaged learning outcomes. To clarify, “I” (i.e., internalization) is addressed by forming communities of practice (CoPs) that (a) include representatives from all stakeholder groups; (b) operate in ways that intentionally and transparently see, hear

and value diverse perspectives among them; and (c) empathize authentically with mental health issues impacting various stakeholders.

Regarding “D” (distribution), opportunities for engaged dialogue must be made across multiple communication channels because not all people and groups can or do access the same communication channels. “E” (explanation) prioritizes transparency in communicating the issues and potential implications for the triple bottom line of corporate social responsibility (CSR). (a.k.a. people, planet, profit). Finally, “A” (action) ought to be based on decentralized decision-making from production to distribution, as well as on both short term and long term solutions. In summary, we argue that dialogue is a critical means by which to achieve engaged learning as illustrated in the IDEA model. We believe that following these guidelines may help us find our way back from polarizing divergence to convergence as the ultimate goal.

IDEA Model⁴



¹ Perelman, C., & Olbrechts-Tyteca, L. (1969). The New Rhetoric: A Treatise on Argument. University of Notre Dame Press.

² Kent, M. L., & Taylor, M. (2002). Toward a dialogic theory of public relations. Public Relations Review, 28(1), pp. 21-37.

³ Sellnow, D. D., & Sellnow, T. L. (2019). The IDEA model for effective instructional risk and crisis communication by emergency managers and other key spokespersons. Journal of Emergency Management (Weston, Mass.), 17(1), pp. 67-78.

⁴ This Photo by Unknown Author is licensed under CC BY.

PREVENTION OF POLARIZATION: COMMUNICATING RISK WHERE YOUR TARGET AUDIENCE LIVES

Michael Greenwell currently serves as the ICF liaison to all CDC Centers, Institutes and Offices. He has over 25 years of experience in public health and health communications

Prevention of Polarization: In this topic, we will outline the steps to take when preventing a divided population, using artificial and human intelligence for good.

Is polarization in American society – both politically and geographically – affecting how we receive messages about important issues such as getting a COVID-19 vaccination? Based on surveys conducted by ICF in 2020 and 2021, the answer appears to be yes.

First, it is important to note that the U.S. is polarizing faster than other democracies. A 2020 study co-authored by Brown University economist Jesse Shapiro found that Americans' feelings toward members of the other political party have worsened over time faster than those of residents of European and other prominent democracies¹. Shapiro cites possible reasons as increased racial division, the rise of partisan cable news and changes in the composition of the Democratic and Republican parties. Further, we are increasingly polarized geographically. Red zip codes are getting redder; blue zip codes are getting bluer. Americans appear to be sorting themselves with their feet!

Differences between rural and urban areas with regard to COVID-19 have been shown to be quite distinct. COVID-19 vaccination coverage with the first dose of the primary vaccination series was lower in rural (58.5%) than in urban counties (75.4%).

These disparities have continued to increase.

The ICF survey assessed party affiliation, voting preference, attitudes and attitude change during the COVID-19 global pandemic. Important differences were found such as:

- About 60% of those who identified as Democrats indicated they had great confidence that scientists act in the best interest of the public, compared to about 30% of those who identified as Republicans.
- There was a 15% difference between those who identified as Democrats and Republicans in intention to get the COVID-19 vaccine – with Democrats higher – in the months before the vaccine became available.

So how do we help to overcome polarization in communicating risk concerning issues such as addressing a global pandemic? Some risk communication experts have discussed what they call the “trap of being right.” Scientists may believe that having all the data to make a point is all that is needed. Risk communication scholars are reporting that communication is more effective if it addresses what people need and want to know, not just if it covers what experts

believe is important. We must recognize the power of storytelling, particularly among people who might be skeptical on an issue, and consider carefully whether what we are asking the audience to do is a realistic possibility.

Polarization – at a level that many have referred to as toxic – is now an important backdrop to any risk communication effort in the U.S. Risk communicators must recognize this environment and consider the underlying beliefs of the audience when developing messages to address important issues such as the health of the public.



¹ Boxell, L., Gentzkow, M., & Shapiro, J. (2020). Cross-country trends in affective polarization. NBER Working Paper Series.

ACT 2: WE, THE PEOPLE

The Power of the People: Like All Power, Both a Blessing and a Curse.

Scholars and practitioners agree that there have been shifts in expectations, media consumption and consumer perceptions regarding complex and challenging issues. There is a desire to reach across differences and sidelines to deal with the problems society faces. It seems that problem/identification is over and communicators want to move toward problem/solution. While contending with the “new reality,” conversations focus on understanding the obstacles our society now faces: the 24/7 access to social media, a drop in empathy, changes to our ability to understand and, ultimately, the ever important role that organizations play in these complex and challenging political and social situations.

There is no simple answer to the ever-evolving world. What seems to be top of mind today, however, includes knowledge and reflection.

Knowledge: What is known? How do we know it? These are classic questions for any professional. Then it shifts to who has access to the information. Is the knowledge still relevant? Who does the knowledge reflect?

Reflection: How does our knowledge come to be? How is my perspective different from yours? And deeper, how should I treat these differing perspectives?

From afar, these conclusions and notations seem to be removed from crisis communication and the issues organizations face. Au contraire, these important discussions are integral to the future of crisis communication. Indeed, for how could those who serve others expect to do so both effectively and ethically without being in touch with the needs around them?

For now – and for the sake of the future – communicators should think and listen at least twice as much as they speak to avoid adding to the current dissensus and clutter society faces.

Taylor Voges
University of Georgia

PUSHBACK OF PUBLICS: MANAGING THROUGH AN ANGRY MARKETPLACE

Richard Levick, Esq., @richardlevick, is Chairman and CEO of LEVICK, a leading international crisis and public affairs communications firm. He is a frequent television, radio, online and print commentator.

Pushback of Publics: This topic examines the differing perspectives of those who depend on our practices. In this section, we discuss the nuances of acting on issues that our stakeholders, both internal and external, may not agree on. This topic provides both insight and anecdotes on working with those who may not always see eye to eye.

“Sir, your Grace’s displeasure and my imprisonment are things so strange unto me, as what to write, or what to excuse, I am altogether ignorant ... And to speak a truth, never Prince had wife more loyal in all duty, and in all true affection, than you have ever found in Anne Boleyn ...”

— *Final letter from Anne Boleyn to King Henry VIII, from her prison in the Tower of London.*

Blamed falsely for King Henry VIII break with the Catholic Church, for infidelity, incest and seduction by witchcraft, Queen Anne Boleyn was beheaded. It was, of course, powerful gaslighting, gleefully engaged in not just by the King but by the insiders of the Royal Court. Sensing her weakness, they piled on and, among other things, referred to the Queen as “the concubine.” The King had eyes for Jane Seymore.

It has been nearly five hundred years, and yet I wonder how much we have evolved. Social media, it seems, have made us all members of a very large Royal Court, piling on, selective with facts and reducing epistemology into a debate over triggering. How does one achieve wisdom without debate?

With only a few historic exceptions – 1907 and World War II come to mind – corporations have largely stayed out of politics. Today, new generations of consumers increasingly define brands not just by their products but by issues such as environmental footprint, position on social issues, political contributions, diversity and even how and where they advertise.

Corporations such as Disney, Delta, AT&T and hundreds more are being pulled into the maelstrom, often regardless of their actual policies or positions. Today it is no longer possible to “avoid politics.” Politics is coming for your company. Survival and success depend on planning for it.

If our recent forbearers of the World War II generation were the “Greatest Generation,” our current tribal divisions make us almost the perfect opposite. We see what is possible and put it out of reach.

There is no perfect strategy, but there are a number of things that companies can do to reduce exposure and avoid pushback from angry publics. Here are a few of them:

1. Blow up your silos. Integrate teams so that legal, investor relations, public relations, brand, HR, advertising and others work together seamlessly and see the world through a lens that includes an understanding of law, politics, business and history. Adversaries are increasingly grassroots, not just competitors, the plaintiffs’ bar or regulators. They play by different rules.
2. Track issues using human intelligence over AI so that trends are instantly understood and anticipated before they become public issues. Too many companies rely just on “Big Data” without an understanding of history or politics which dictate when a single tweet means a movement and others are to be ignored.
3. “Know ‘em before you need ‘em.” Build your third party allies now, during peacetime. In the early days of a rising issue, potential critics are looking to their trusted icons to determine how they will respond. Having dependable relationships with non-profits, think tanks, opinion writers, former members of congress, academics and others with a tribal following can be a powerful – and sometimes last – line of defense.
4. See your company as your critics do. Understanding their perspective can help you anticipate why positives are perceived as negatives and vice versa. Seeing the world differently empowers you to become a change agent rather than thinking that more effective “messaging” alone will change minds.
5. Work to move your brand to a theology. Nike, Apple, Starbucks, Marriott and a few other corporations can more easily navigate crises because their customers and stakeholders feel that these companies are part of their own

identity. How are you working to become part of the hearts and minds of your customers and stakeholders?

6. Plan for the long term. If you know your authentic brand, know who your new customers are going to be and know where the market is going, you can more easily make sacrifices and endure criticism.

The market of fairness and reason has been replaced by one of anger and guilt-by-accusation. We cannot navigate these rocky shoals by playing Whac-a-Mole. We need a multidisciplinary, long term understanding of where the market is going and the discipline to abide by it.

”

A lie can travel halfway around the world while the truth is putting on its shoes.

— Mark Twain

PRESSURE OF PERFECTION: INSIGHTS FROM ANALYTICS

Kate LaVail is the Senior Vice President of Analytics at Ketchum, leading crisis and risk analytics work. She has published multiple articles on health, crisis and risk communications throughout her career.

Pressure of Perfection: This topic explores the consequences at the epicenter of crisis communication. Practitioners are expected to say exactly the right thing at exactly the right time. Here, we dive deeper into what this pressure of perfection looks like, how it is managed and the tools we can use to turn that stress into proactive productivity.

There is no “perfect” in crisis communication.

Or perhaps you could argue that “perfect” is a crisis averted. Occasionally, you can achieve lofty goals, such as reputational growth from an outstanding response to events. Even then, you don’t know how well – or how badly – you handled the challenge unless you measure your progress against a baseline. A crisis’ final test – your real ‘boss battle’ – is how well you face the next crisis. Did you learn from your mistakes? Did you implement changes from lessons learned? If your answer is yes, then you are about as close to perfect as possible.

Measuring progress and performance

Implementing changes from lessons learned ensures a more knowledgeable and effective approach. Avoiding previous mistakes requires measuring and learning what worked and what didn’t. There are measurements that fuel your progress in real-time, offering insight needed to determine your performance:

- Measurement: tracking, alerting and summarizing
- Benchmarking: comparing where you started to your progress and performance.
- Strategy Development: message testing, influencer analysis, audience analysis informs tailoring and targeting.
- Measuring Impact: social and traditional media analysis, message pull-through, spokesperson performance to determine what made an impact and what didn’t.
- Evaluation: a dynamic review of successes and failures and an actionable plan to improve future efforts; a hot wash, or after-action.

Within these steps, there are both reactive and proactive measures. A crisis arises and you implement tracking and set up news alerts. Ideally, you proactively measured a baseline with which to compare how significant the crisis is for the invested parties. Rest assured, there will always be another crisis, so taking the time to evaluate yours can be viewed as both reactively evaluating the past and proactively informing future efforts.

Perfect in Process

The idea of “perfect” rests in the process. Many crisis teams respond to the immediate. It isn’t in their DNA to spend time dwelling on the past – but this is exactly how you do better in the future. In fact, thinking of a crisis as a linear event with a clear beginning and end is not nearly as helpful as thinking of it as a cycle that goes around and around. Each rotation may look different, with different issues and players, but your process doesn’t stop. It is always getting smarter.

Your evaluation highlights how different audiences responded, which spokespeople were most effective. You learn what kinds of messages were most impactful in shaping the dialogue (and ideally, why), and what you would do better next time. There is one more step that closes the loop: you identify individuals personally accountable for taking necessary steps to implement changes and ensure those changes are made. That’s it – loop closed and process ongoing.

Implementing improvements is easier said than done. Personal accountability for making changes ensures this is not mere lip service. It also averts a sizable pitfall – knowledge management. When one person is responsible for planning and/or implementation, all the knowledge can walk out the door with one person. It also doesn’t benefit from the experience and knowledge of diverse stakeholders.

Speaking of diversity, it is vital to note that a plan owned by one person is weakened by the lack of voices who may be most familiar with certain steps in the process, who may have experiences averting the emergence of additional problems and may have a better feel

for how messages may be received by different audiences. Diverse ownership of the process makes it durable. Engage stakeholders for their expertise whenever possible.

Trust the process

Committing to continual optimization can be daunting, and it does involve work that doesn’t ebb once the adrenaline-fueled initial response is over. It may be helpful to think of engaging in four stages, like the seasons.

1. You plan, operationalizing and agreeing on who, precisely, the audience and stakeholders are, what the problem is and what success looks like. Determining what you currently know and what you need to find out, all to develop a roadmap to get you to your goal.
2. You craft, using powerful insights to tailor your messages and communications and target your key stakeholders and audiences.
3. You execute, using analytics for real-time and summary feedback on the effectiveness and efficiency of your work.
4. You attribute, tracking your work against the behavior, knowledge and/or attitudes you are trying to change or maintain, measuring the performance of your work against a baseline.

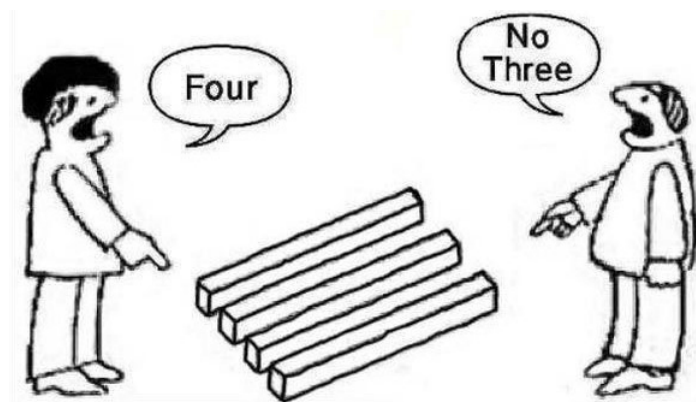
Then, you start all over again. The evaluation really is just a return to planning, with new knowledge informing what worked and didn’t, and tactical steps to improve. Committing to this process ensures you are always working smarter and leverages knowledge and experience that has a lasting impact on your work.

PRIVILEGE OF PERSPECTIVE

Rodrigo A. Sierra is chief communications officer and senior vice president of the American Medical Association (AMA). His experience in strategy, policy and organizational issues have equipped him to create and implement proactive initiatives that affect positive change for business and social impact.

Privilege of Perspective: Privilege of perspective pushes us to think about the voices that are heard, understood and revered more often than others. Here, we identify the dominant voices, bring in new ones and merge the two to combat polarization in a new way.

What do you see?



It's all about perspective.



This view of Chicago's skyline is a perspective we don't usually see. The skyline is most often shown from a glimmering Lake Michigan facing west with skyscrapers glowing in the background, the neighborhoods beyond the skyline barely noticeable. But this perspective, from Chicago's often invisible

west side neighborhoods looking east is an entirely different picture.

In these neighborhoods, just four miles and only seven public transportation stops away from downtown, the average life expectancy for residents is 16 years less than those who live in Chicago's so-called gold coast neighborhood.

For those who live and work in downtown Chicago, might their privilege of perspective shape their beliefs, their politics, the policies they make and the businesses they run? How might these decisions affect the lives of those who live on the west side?

Privilege of perspective is powerful. As it relates to DEI and so many other factors that shape government, business and non-profits, it is vital to acknowledge how privilege informs decisions that in turn shape communities and lives. Doing so requires intentionality in day-to-day practices as organizations debate and develop programs, products and policies.

An example of perspective and how it shaped business practices:

As 2020 began, the AMA and its Center for Health Equity (The Center) were ramping up the work The Center had

begun when it was created in mid-2019. The AMA was committed to addressing health equity in all its work, across the organization. The AMA communications team was prepared to incorporate equity messages in organization communications throughout the year.

This intentional work led to the AMA's decision to become a partner with the West Side United (WSU) community coalition and to invest \$2 million in WSU to address inequities in health care, education, economic vitality and infrastructure on Chicago's West Side. The AMA's All- Employee meeting in March 2020 included a panel of experts discussing health equity. Policy work was under way that would result in the AMA Board of Trustees declaring racism as a threat to public health in June.

So, when the COVID-19 pandemic began, the AMA was equipped to view it through an equity lens. Without this work, the AMA would not have been positioned to take the public lead on equity issues related to the pandemic. Likewise, the pandemic helped accelerate The Center's work to identify and eliminate health inequities. The Center's work raises the bar for the AMA's communications and thought-leadership efforts and provides a runway for more equity-focused work and communications.

This work is strengthened and advanced through the AMA's new efforts to share power with the National Medical Association (Black physicians), National Hispanic Medical Association, Association of American Indian Physicians and others. Likewise, the work is communicated and amplified through the AMA's intentional relationship building with a variety of journalist organizations including the

National Association of Black Journalists, the National Association of Hispanic Journalists and the National Lesbian and Gay Journalists Association.



ACT 3: RESOLUTION & POP TAKEAWAYS

ORGANIZATIONAL CRISES

Participants agreed that among the organizational lessons learned since 2020 is the power of people. Good people with good judgment in organizations are key to managing a crisis such as the pandemic that affects all stakeholders.

Due to the “snackable” portion size of communication, especially via social media, our experts said that overcommunication is essential. Broad brush strokes of communication are simply not sufficient. Echo chambers of information are a challenge to overcome. Finding ways to expose people to information that may be counter to their opinions is important.

Owned media can get such messages to a spectrum of stakeholders. Direct-to-audience media generate hundreds of thousands or even millions of views depending on the subject. Our experts recommend “hammering” your top messages to try and center the organization among its varied audiences. Finding and holding the middle ground is essential in an environment that can be toxically polarizing.

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PUBLIC CRISIS

The COVID-19 pandemic, more large-scale environmental disasters and continued political divisiveness greatly affect crisis communication professional practice and academic scholarship. Crises are more complex, often give rise to internal and external conflicts, and as such, necessitate more sophisticated and nimble crisis communication strategies and responses. Crisis communication practice and theories need to recognize that group identification, skepticism and active opposition, often grounded in moral and political values, require more than providing information through traditional news media. Often, government and corporate recommendations and policies, surface value and ideological differences and low compliance. Going forward, crisis scholars and practitioners should 1) recognize messages are rarely sufficient for addressing value and ideological differences, 2) place more emphasis on fostering collaborative, solutions-focused responses that bridge divides, and 3) seek input and engagement from a diverse set of publics and stakeholders, including employees.

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SOCIAL MEDIA & EMERGING TECHNOLOGY

There will always be a crisis somewhere somehow. The first course of action is to resist the temptation to call everything a crisis. Polarization by itself is not a crisis per se. Yet, toxic polarization is a sticky crisis issue that can exacerbate challenging situations by pulling people apart from where a common ground for conflict resolution and proactive crisis management would have been found and sustained.

As I reflect on our workgroup and the various insightful discussions, Gabriel García Márquez's reminiscing of his friendship with fellow journalists rings a distant bell:

"What was exemplary about that friendship was its ability to prevail over opposing opinions. Our political disagreements were very deep and became even deeper as the world around us fell apart, but we always knew how to find a common ground where we could continue fighting together for the causes we thought were just."

Will social media and emerging technology create further informational and opinionated silos that divide us into unbridgeable schisms? Or will we, as communicators, have an unprecedented opportunity to serve as mediators to use media technology to bring people closer along the thinning thread of authentic conversation? Instead of looking elsewhere, the key to unlocking the Power of People is – and might have always been – right in our open palms and beseeching eyes, yearning for joining hands and meeting the sight of gentle, undaunted light of humanity.

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POP POINTS: LOOKING BACK & LOOKING AHEAD

The most important lessons learned since 2020

- There is always a crisis although not everything is a crisis.
- Good communication (and listening) is hard but more important than ever, including being authentic and able to address questions continuously as issues evolve.
- Surrounding polarized issues, there are so many voices from all directions, adding more conflicts and even leading to crises.
- Logic does not always win or as often as you would hope; skepticism might make publics not trust you.
- Scientific and regulatory communication becomes more challenging due to issue complexity, the needs to embrace scientific and technological uncertainty, as well as to enhance awareness of unintended consequences of terminology, have become more pressing than ever.
- It is important to use effective and ethical communication to recognize leadership and build/strengthen organization-public trust in order to work together and find solutions on polarized issues.
- Crisis communication has become an internal function for organizations.
- People and purpose are of paramount importance.

The most pressing polarization-related issues to manage in the next five years

- Given the nature of crisis unpredictability and the ever surrounding uncertainty, the public relations and crisis communication consulting industry is likely to see further growth as organizations and stakeholders tend to be cautious or concerned about what is happening and what they should do in the future.
- It is important to keep in mind that people rely heavily on tradition for security or uncertainty avoidance, which is one of the primary factors for resistance to change (e.g., “traditionally = great news!”).
- Social media continues to challenge crisis management on all fronts.
- The challenge of combating distrust in science on social media requires advanced planning and implementation of how to communicate about science on social media.
- More diverse voices (e.g., voices from local news outlets) need to be heard.
- The lack of information consumption depth becomes a serious problem, the solutions of which include: to encourage people to dig deeper into the information, to avoid echo chambers caused by social media, algorithms and mainstream national media.

- Businesses and corporations might have a unique opportunity for working with publics to combat toxic polarization.
- The new remote working mode brings the questions to employees’ productivity, mental health and the role of socializing in overall wellbeing.

Ways to unlock the power of people in crisis communication and management

- Activism can bring about organic challenges to organizations as well as complicating polarized issues and eroding publics’ trust in organizations.
- Understanding “activist employees and employee activists” and their expectation of what their organizations should or shouldn’t stand for/say about social issues.
- It is critical to measure if (and how) employees are disappointed in the ways organizations address/are engaged with social issues.
- People are increasingly experiencing consuming news and information at the surface level and are often distracted by clickbait. Therefore, organizations need to be consistent and convey mindfulness in messages sent out based on listening and ethical decisions made regarding whether (and if yes how) to address social issues. By listening you can decide what to address and determine how to adjust.

The next-generation questions practitioners and scholars should collaborate on

- How can we maintain long-term sustainability in a post-COVID era since we might not know the overall impacts of the pandemic?

- How does WFH (remote work) influence crisis communication?
- How can we collaborate with mental health scholars to understand how to support employees’ mental health and wellbeing?
- How do we get people out of the echo chambers on polarized issues?
- How to get out of toxic polarization and help broader communities come to more of a middle ground for meaningful dialogues?

What to keep in mind as we co-create pathways toward co-creating solutions

- Organizations can no longer function without acknowledging the social aspect of businesses.
- Organizations need to find ways to inject different viewpoints (validated and authentic) into the information people are consuming via various ways (e.g., dialogues at ground level, open the spaces for depolarization).
- There is a need for institutional willingness to risk vulnerability in order to open up for knowledge, inspiration and new ways of closing the think-do gaps.
- Getting the POP (Power of People) into the solutions.

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“The digital environment now demands crisis managers embrace dissensus. Segments of stakeholders are now polarized, and organizations must navigate that fact.”

— *W. Timothy Coombs, Permanence of Polarization*

“The problem of polarization was largely created by communication and will need to be solved through communication. Crisis communication scholars can and should be deeply engaged in this quest for resolution.”

— *Timothy Sellnow & Deanna Sellnow, Problem of Polarization*

“Polarization is not always a bad thing. It is what makes for healthy debate and a two-party system. Toxic polarization, where many say we are in the U.S. today, has become a major obstacle to effective communication about science and health.”

— *Michael Greenwell, Prevention of Polarization*

“‘Be swift to hear but with patience make your reply.’ Apocrypha. Without it, we are all condemned to live the life of The Who’s *Won’t Get Fooled Again* — ‘meet the new boss, same as the old boss.’”

— *Richard Levick, Pushback of Publics*

“Perfection isn’t always possible, particularly in a quick turn crisis situation, you can’t have it all.”

— *Patrick O’Donnell, Pressure of Perfection*

“Perspective is a particular way of considering something. How often do communicators consider their audience’s perspective in our work or even if their audience has the privilege of perspective?”

— *Rodrigo Sierra, Privilege of Perspective*



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