

Theories as Recipes for Disaster: *From Snapshots to Dynamic Diagnosis*

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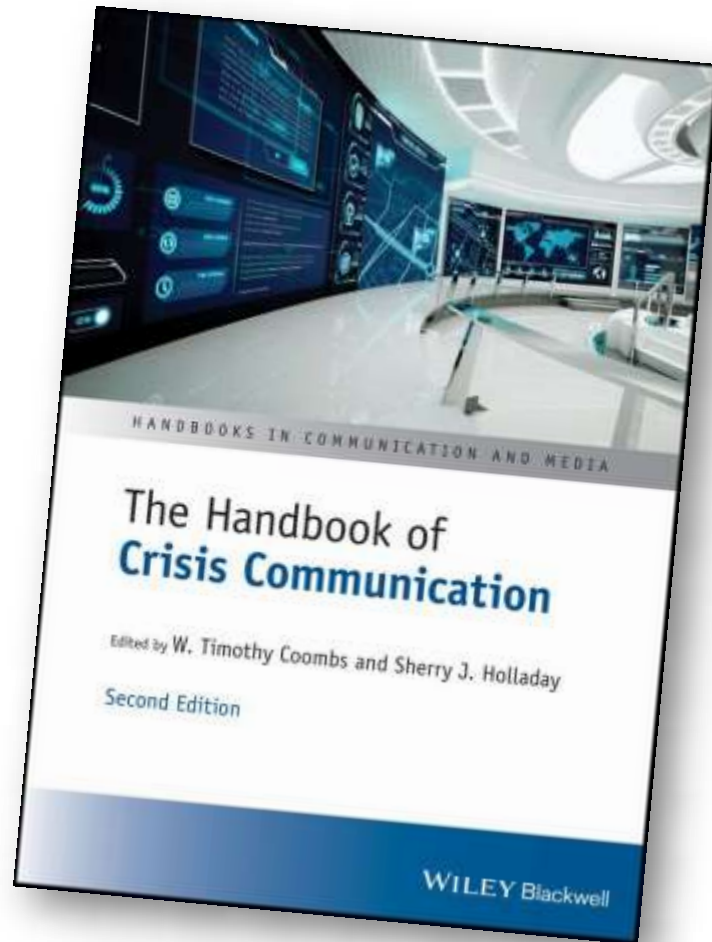
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Theory vs reality



Situational Crisis Communication Theory



SCCT and Researchers: Common Errors when Applying SCCT

Any time a theory becomes popular, there can be issues with people misinterpreting or misrepresenting the theory. Misinterpretations occur when people overlook key points from the theory when trying to apply it. Misrepresentations occur when people wrongly make claims that do not exist within a theory, a factual error. Both are dangerous because knowledge is created through improper procedures, assumptions, and the faulty results that are produced from such efforts may be serially reproduced and lead additional researchers to contribute to problematic research. SCCT research reflects a smattering of examples of each, which is frustrating to those who contribute to theory development and the body of knowledge derived from SCCT. However, researchers have generally applied SCCT properly. This section reviews

Situational Crisis Communication Theory

Primary crisis response strategies
Deny crisis response strategies
• Attack the accuser: Crisis manager confronts the person or group claiming something is wrong with the organization. • Denial: Crisis manager asserts that there is no crisis. • Scapegoat: Crisis manager blames some person or group outside of the organization for the crisis.
Diminish crisis response strategies
• Excuse: Crisis manager minimizes organizational responsibility by denying intent to do harm and/or claiming inability to control the events that triggered the crisis. • Justification: Crisis manager minimizes the perceived damage caused by the crisis.
Rebuild crisis response strategies
• Compensation: Crisis manager offers money or other gifts to victims. • Apology: Crisis manager indicates the organization takes full responsibility for the crisis and asks stakeholders for forgiveness.
Secondary crisis response strategies
Bolstering crisis response strategies
• Reminder: Tell stakeholders about the past good works of the organization. • Ingratiation: Crisis manager praises stakeholders and/or reminds them of past good works by the organization. • Victimage: Crisis managers remind stakeholders that the organization is a victim of the crisis too.

SCCT SITUATIONAL CRISIS COMMUNICATION THEORY

Building and maintaining reputation when crisis strikes

SCCT explains how organizations can respond to different types of crises to protect their reputation.



WHAT IS SCCT?

SCCT (Coombs, 2007, 2015) is a theory that helps organizations choose the most appropriate communication strategies during a crisis based on:

- Attribution of responsibility**
Who is (perceived to be) responsible?
- Crisis type**
What kind of crisis is it?
- Reputation threat**
How much threat does the crisis pose to organizational reputation?

3 KEY FACTORS IN SCCT

- Attribution Theory**
People seek to blame someone. Perceived responsibility drives reputation damage.
- Reputation is Valuable**
Crisis threaten reputation, a key intangible asset.
- Communication Matters**
The right response, delivered well, can protect or restore reputation.

1. CRISIS TYPES AND LEVEL OF RESPONSIBILITY

VICTIM CRISIS

Low responsibility



The organization is a victim of an event beyond its control.

Examples: natural disasters, rumors, sabotage

ACCIDENTAL CRISIS

Moderate responsibility



The organization did not intend harm, but could have prevented the event.

Examples: technical errors, product harm, accidents

PREVENTABLE CRISIS

High responsibility



The organization intended harm or showed reckless disregard.

Examples: product tampering, violations, cover-ups

LOW PERCEIVED RESPONSIBILITY HIGH

2. MATCHING CRISIS TYPES TO RESPONSE STRATEGIES

VICTIM CRISIS

Primary goal:
Express sympathy



Recommended strategies

- Express Sympathy
- Offer Support

ACCIDENTAL CRISIS

Primary goal:
Reduce concerns



Recommended strategies

- Provide Information
- Accept Responsibility
- Offer Repair

PREVENTABLE CRISIS

Primary goal:
Rebuild trust



Recommended strategies

- Accept Responsibility
- Offer Repair
- Promise Change

4. RESPONSE STRATEGIES OVERVIEW

STRATEGY	PURPOSE	EXAMPLES
Express Sympathy	Show concern for victims	"We are deeply sorry for what you've gone through."
Provide Information	Inform the public about the crisis	"Here is what we know so far..."
Accept Responsibility	Acknowledge responsibility	"We made a mistake and take full responsibility."
Offer Repair	Offer to fix the problem	"We will compensate those affected."
Promise Change	Commit to preventing recurrence	"We will change our policies and processes."
Offer Support	Provide aid or support	"We are here to help in any way we can."

5. KEY TAKEAWAY

Match your response to the crisis. The better the fit between the crisis type (responsibility) and your communication strategy, the better the chance of protecting reputation and maintaining stakeholder trust.



REMEMBER

In a crisis, it's not just what happened, but how you communicate about it that shapes your reputation.

Sources: Coombs, W. T. (2007). Protecting Organization Reputations During a Crisis: The Development and Application of Situational Crisis Communication Theory. *Journal of PR Research*, 19(2), 163-176.



Beyond the snapshot: Rethinking crisis communication theories in dynamic crisis situations

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ABSTRACT

Traditional theories of crisis communication are often interpreted in ways that assume responsibility for a crisis is static. In such cases, response strategies are used as a “snapshot” to assess attributed crisis responsibilities under presumed static circumstances, which then define the most appropriate response strategies. This study challenges that notion, arguing that effective crisis responses must actively anticipate and adapt to evolving dynamics in ongoing crises. It explores the dynamics of assigned crisis responsibility through two key dimensions. First, the study addresses the dynamics that occur when perceptions of the cause of a crisis shift as new information becomes available. Second, it delves into the concept of shared responsibility, illustrating that accountability and assigned responsibility for a crisis may be distributed among various stakeholders as the crisis unfolds. Interactions among these stakeholders can change the dynamics by influencing perceived crisis responsibility. The study concludes that understanding these dynamics is crucial for effective crisis management, as they significantly impact stakeholder relations, public perception, and the choice of subsequent intervention strategies.



Swiss Cheese Model (Reason, 1990)

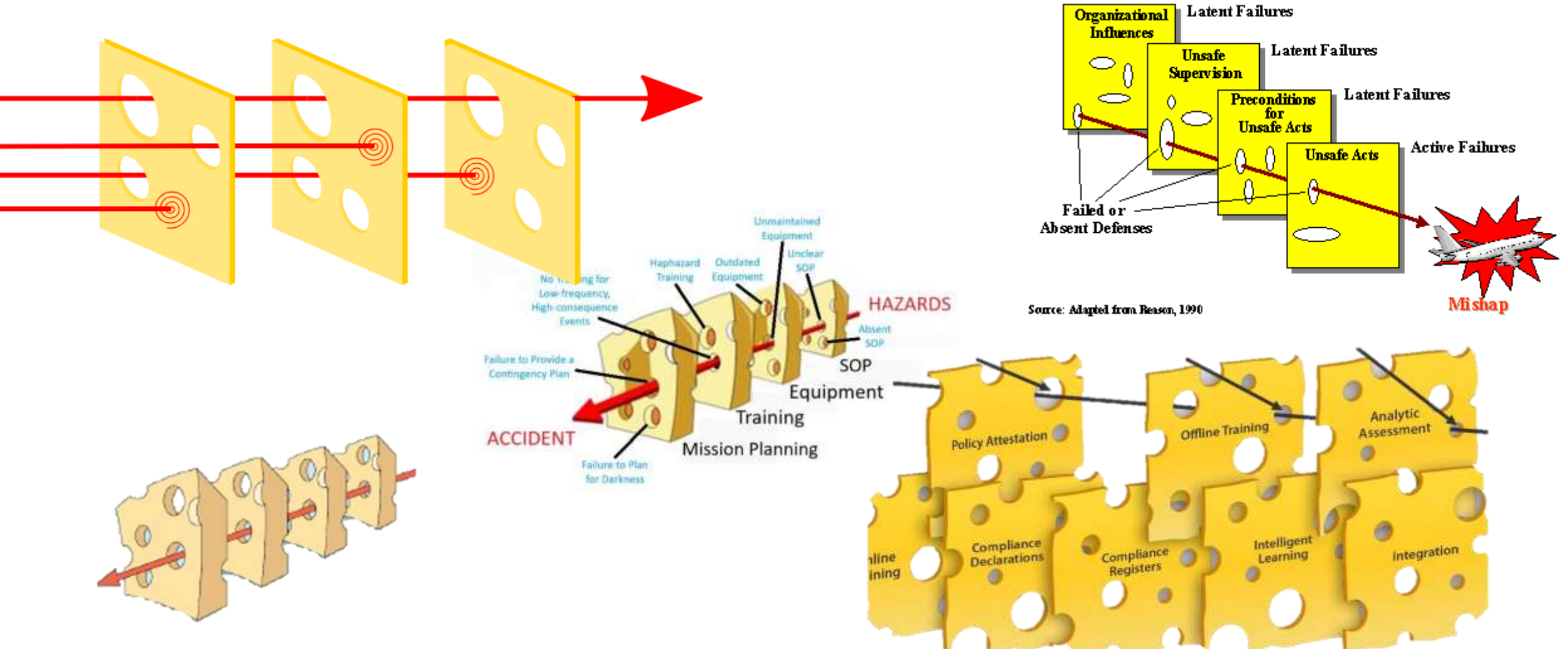




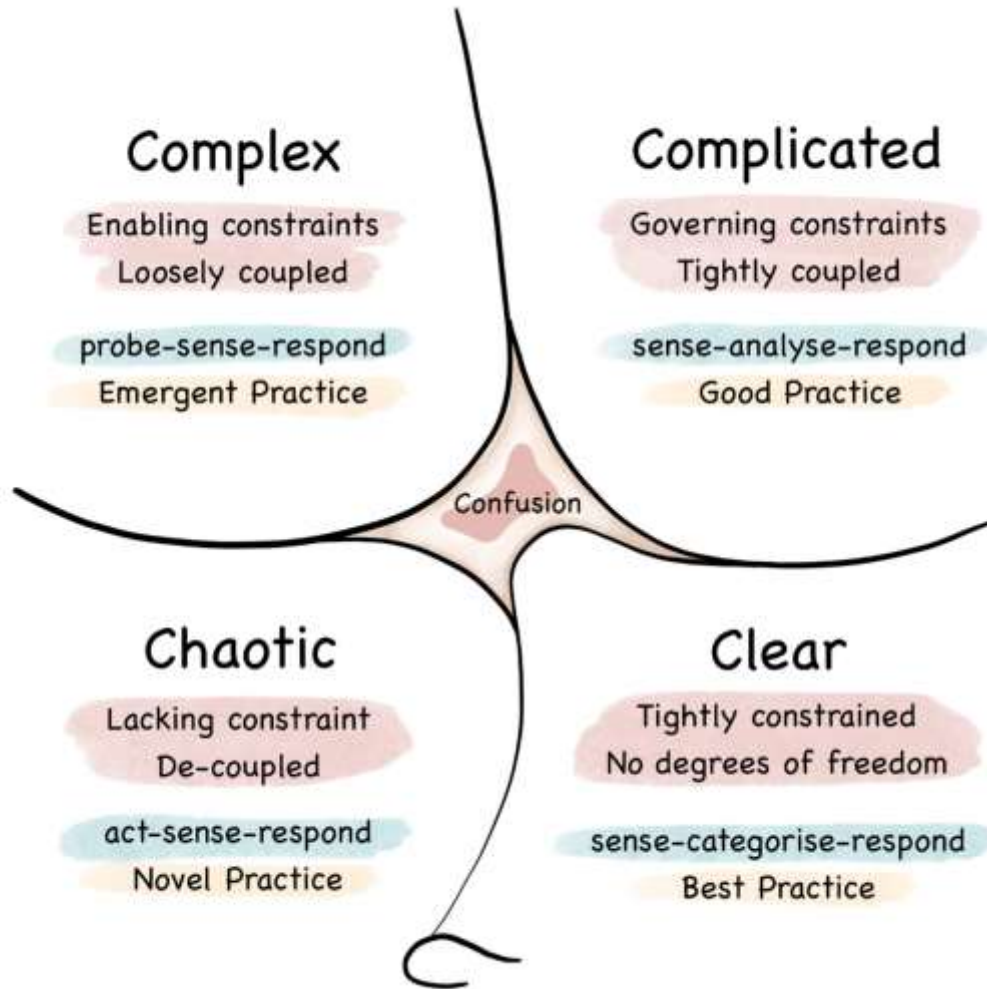
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"A serious threat to the basic structures or the fundamental values and norms of a social system, which, under time pressure and highly uncertain circumstances, necessitates making critical decisions."

Rosenthal, Charles and 't Hart, 1989

We need to reduce the uncertainty

Cynefin model (Snowden & Boone, 2007)



diagnostic or prescriptive models?

The model says we should do this.

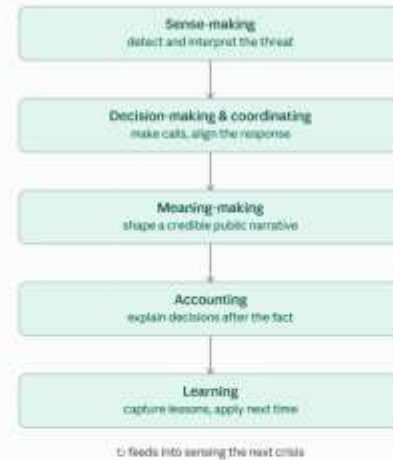
*"Reflective practice is a dialogue of thinking and doing
through which I become more skillful."*

Donald Schön, 1983

Time pressure?
AI as the management solution?

Visualize Boin et al.'s five critical tasks of crisis leadership.

Searched the web, read a file



These are the five tasks Arjen Boin, Paul 't Hart, Eric Stern, and Bengt Sundelius identify as the core work of crisis leadership in *The Politics of Crisis Management*. The sequence runs roughly from the acute phase to the aftermath: leaders first have to sense-make (figure out what's actually happening amid ambiguous, fast-moving information), then decide and coordinate (make the hard calls and get disparate agencies pulling together), then meaning-make (offer the public a credible story about what's going on, since a vacuum gets filled by rumor and blame), then account for their choices once the acute phase passes, and finally learn from the episode — which feeds back into how well they'll sense the next crisis.

A useful nuance from the book: most crisis failures aren't operational, they're failures of meaning-making or accounting — the response itself may have gone fine, but leaders lost the narrative or couldn't credibly explain their decisions afterward.

Sources:

- Notes on "The Politics of Crisis Management" (Boin et al., 2016) — EA Forum

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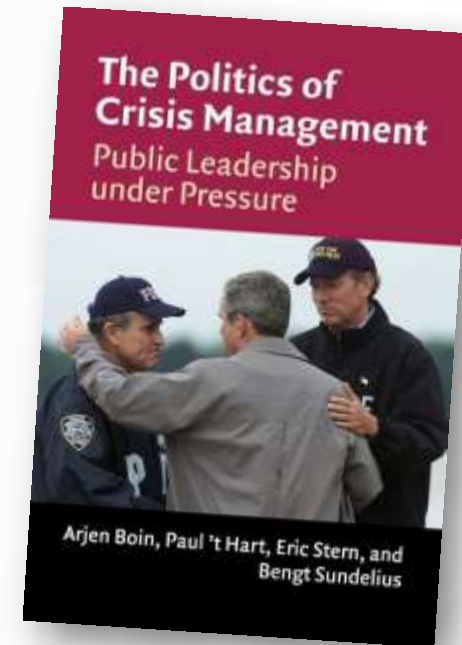
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You know the five essential elements by Hobfoll et al.? What are those five elements.

Yes — this is from Hobfoll et al.'s influential 2007 paper "Five Essential Elements of Immediate and Mid-Term Mass Trauma Intervention: Empirical Evidence" (published in *Psychiatry*), which reviewed the disaster/trauma intervention literature and distilled it into five evidence-supported principles that interventions should promote:

1. **A sense of safety** — helping people feel physically and psychologically safe, and reducing ongoing threat where possible.
2. **Calming** — reducing physiological arousal and acute distress (panic, hyperarousal) so people can function and think clearly.
3. **A sense of self- and community efficacy** — restoring people's belief that they and their community can effectively influence outcomes and cope, rather than feeling helpless.
4. **Connectedness** — fostering social support and a sense of belonging, since isolation worsens outcomes and social bonds are protective.
5. **Hope** — instilling optimism about recovery and the future, since hopelessness is strongly linked to poor long-term outcomes.

These five elements became a widely cited framework in disaster mental health and psychological first aid, used to guide both immediate crisis response and longer-term recovery programs.



Five Essential Elements of Immediate and Mid-Term Mass Trauma Intervention: Empirical Evidence

Stevan E. Hobfoll, Patricia Watson, Carl C. Bell, Richard A. Bryant, Melissa J. Brymer, Matthew J. Friedman, Merle Friedman, Berthold P.R. Gersons, Joop T.V.M de Jong, Christopher M. Layne, Shira Maguen, Yuval Neria, Ann E. Norwood, Robert S. Pynoos, Dori Reissman, Josef I. Ruzek, Arich Y. Shalev, Zahava Solomon, Alan M. Steinberg, and Robert J. Ursano

“When we encounter ordered lists, we do not only encode the items themselves. We also encode their position in the list. So simply adding numbers can subtly influence how we understand and remember a theory.”

Kao et al. (2020), “Absolute and Relative Knowledge of Ordinal Position on Implied Lists”, Journal of Experimental Psychology

Theories become recipes when we remove the conditions, contingencies and qualifications that made them theories in the first place.



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Crisis communication should be consistent across all audiences.

~~Crisis communication should be consistent across all audiences.~~

Crisis communication should be coherent, but may need to differentiate across audiences and contexts.

Danish cartoon riots: Arla Foods



Activists of the Sunni Action Committee chant slogans to protest against the republication of cartoons depicting the Prophet Mohammad, in Karachi, 29 February 2008. , REUTERS/Athar Hussain

Always be transparent.

~~Always be transparent.~~

Be as transparent as you responsibly can, and explain what you cannot disclose yet and why.



Privacy comes first.

~~Privacy comes first.~~

Privacy matters enormously. Security matters enormously.

The organization responsible should take responsibility.

~~The organization responsible should take responsibility.~~

Responsibility for causing the crisis? Or responsibility for dealing with its consequences?

When theories become recipes.
And principles become absolutes.
We have recipes for disaster.

Anticipate the unknown.

Remain critical.

Diagnose. And ask yourself:

It sounds plausible. But is it actually true?

