Managing Crisis: Best Practices Of Public Information Officers In Higher Education Institutions

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Abstract: This research paper aims to find out the most challenging crisis encountered by certain Higher Education Institutions and how this affects the officials, internal stakeholders, and external stakeholders. Moreover, it also focuses in analyzing the response of the respective Public Information Offices in terms of time pressure, response constraints, control issues, and threat level concerns. To achieve the said aims, this study utilized the qualitative analysis to get the perspectives of people who have a partaking role and have enough experience in the said field. With this, the researcher also performed an in-depth interview with concerned individuals in each chosen Higher Education Institutions who are Dr. Anna Ruby P. Gapasin – Polytechnic University of the Philippines, Dr. Nicolo B. Velasco – Bulacan State University, Mr. Johannes Badillo – De La Salle University, Dr. Vanessa Mae Castillo – Batangas State University, and Ms. Alyssa Mae Azanza – Colegio de San Juan de Letran – Calamba. After a keen study, it showed that the crisis faced by the mentioned HEIs were vandalism/student protests, off-campus tragedy, black propaganda, health crisis, and sex scandal and that these crises directly affected both internal and external stakeholders as well as their reputation. The studied HEIs responded differently as each crisis has unique priorities and factors to consider such as control issues, threat level concerns, time pressure, and response option constraints. DLSU, PUP, BulSU acted immediately while Letran and BSU took a day or a week to respond to the issue showing how well they responded to the time pressure. The HEIs faced response constraints such as budget for PUP and prioritizing the victims' family and the survivors for the BulSU. On the other hand, DLSU had all the budget they need, BSU exerted their best efforts to solve the issue, and Letran refused to respond in the first place which caused all of them no constraint. In controlling the issues, PUP and BulSU had a difficult time with how the media angled their news, and that BulSU had no existing PIO. Moreover, BSU faced the challenge that they were just appointed when they faced the problem and Letran who had a difficult time with the spreading of the rumors and the video online, unlike DLSU who experienced no problems because of their openness to inquiries. Overall, the HEIs who participated in the study confessed that the crisis they experienced had a significant effect on their reputation, rating it 8 out of 10 without denying the fact that their university has learned something from the experience. The chosen HEIs utilized stonewalling which is not always the answer to every crisis for it might tamper the credibility of institutions, assigning the president as the spokesperson which is good for consistency of statement but may also be a disadvantage for the HEIs, grassroots approach, communication campaign, prioritizing during fatal accidents to root out the problem fast, using media connections which is very useful to reach a wider reach of audience, following protocol, and providing a counter propaganda. After addressing all the factors, the study showed that the best practices of PIOs being proactive with their campaign and connecting well with their audience, thinking fast and forming a de facto PIO to address the crisis, utilizing the grassroots approach by prioritizing the needs of the affected stakeholders, doing a comprehensive analysis of the issue, and stonewalling to prolong the progress of the rumor.

Keywords: Best Practices, Crisis, Crisis Management, Higher Education Institutions, Public Information Officers

1. Introduction

Higher Education Institutions are characterized by mission, vision, origin, and accessibility. They are classified as colleges or universities that are either run and funded by the government or by private organizations such as catholic and non-profit entities. The segmentation of HEIs was influenced by the Philippine history wherein higher education was first established [1]. Higher Education in the Philippines started during the Spanish era with the establishment of the University of Sto. Tomas (UST) in 1611. It was followed by the construction of other Catholic higher education institutions like University of San Carlos (USC), Colegio-Seminario de San Ildefonso, Ateneo de Manila University, etc. With the arrival of the United States of America, higher education was expanded in various parts of the country which resulted to the construction of new catholic-sponsored educational institutions like De La Salle University (DLSU). Aside from expansion of catholic schools, it was also the time when the state-sponsored higher education institutions were built including University of the Philippines (UP), Technological University of the Philippines (TUP), and the Polytechnic University of the Philippines (PUP) [1]. In 1951, the Philippine Higher Education Institutions adopted the accreditation process as a means of achieving high quality of education. It was initiated by a group of educators which soon became an accrediting association. Since then, the accrediting association heightened the cooperation among higher education institutions and started to form accrediting bodies. These include the Philippine Accrediting Association of Schools, Colleges and Universities (PAASCU) for

Catholic Schools; the Philippine Association of Colleges and Universities - Commission on Accreditation (PAACU-COA) for non-sectarian groups; the Association of Christian Schools, Colleges and Universities - Accrediting Agency (ACSCU - AA) for the Protestor sector; and the Accrediting Association of Chartered Colleges and Universities (AACCUP) for the members of the Philippine Association of State Universities and Colleges (PASUC) [1]. In May 1994, the government took part on the accreditation process of the HEIs. This led to the creation of the Commission on Higher Education (CHED) which oversees HEIs. In 1994, Senator Francisco Tatad authored the Republic Act No. 7722 or the Higher Education Act of 1994 which mandates the CHED to verify all the requirements for accreditation in all HEIs in the country. Currently, more than 1,900 higher education institutions have already been established. As of August 2016, there are 1,706 private HEIs in the Philippines with 2,127,638 enrolments and 228 public higher education institutions, excluding satellite campuses [2]. With the massive establishment of higher education institutions, Philippines ranked as the highest in terms of the number of universities and colleges among Asian countries in 2016. The success of the Higher Education in the country does not solely depend on the number of HEIs but also on the quality of graduates they produce, the level of their curricula compared to the industry needs and global market, and the response of their stakeholders to their projects and programs. Freeman (1984) as cited in (Marshall, 2018) describes stakeholders as "any group of individuals who can directly affect or is affected by the organization's process." It can

also influence the other objectives of an institution [4]. In HEIs, stakeholders are characterized as either internal or external. Internal stakeholders are individuals who are already committed to serving the institutions and those who participate in the daily life of institutions. This includes students, faculty members, administrative staff members, directors, and the executive officials of the educational institutions. External stakeholders are individuals who have an interest in HEIs such as parents, employers, and even the government [3]. A part of the stakeholder's powers is the ability to impose direct actions in the organization and to control some aspects in the organization. When the stakeholders' decision changes, the higher education institutions automatically evaluate the feedback and improve their processes from it. According to Kettunena(2015), HEIs are the future and its success depends on its approach to management. As the funding bodies of the company, effective communication with stakeholders is an extremely important process [5]. Because of this pressing need, most HEIs create public relations offices to easily communicate with their stakeholders. The Public Information Offices (PIOs) serve as a tool for communication of agencies, institutions, and organizations. They are often the face of the organizations in the absence of an elected leader taking the stage [6]. One of the PIOs' ongoing jobs is to ensure the University's good image, positioning, and identity. They guarantee that the public is kept abreast of any emergency it might be involved with. They develop guidelines for disseminating information and outlining procedures and establish a good working relationship with the public [7]. PIOs are also responsible in managing the crisis being experienced by their leaders, members of the community, and/or stakeholders to maintain the company reputation. There are many definitions of crisis. According to (ZakiRashidi S. a., 2014), crisis is an event which is sudden or unexpected that affects the operations of an institution. It also threatens the welfare of its stakeholders including students, parents, personnel, and even the institution's resources [8]. A crisis cannot be expected. It can happen at any time and place--as much as an organization tries to avoid them. No matter what kind of a business or what the size of an organization is, everyone needs to be prepared to handle potentially negative situations and to effectively communicate with its internal and external stakeholders [9]. Crises can be separated into two categories: natural and human-made. According to (ZakiRashidi S. a., 2014), natural crises deal with nature and their environments such as accidents while human-made crises are intentional implemented by a person to get ahead or cause harm to others. But as every crisis is diverse and unique, organizations have different ways of coping with it. Thus, the purpose of this study is to identify the best practices of PIOs in coping up during the crisis. Findings from this study provide an overview of crisis faced by HEIs and the practical application practices of PIOs in coping up with the problems.

2. Theoretical and Conceptual Frameworks

This study used the Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) by W. Timothy Coombs and the Crisis Management: Strategic Considerations adopted from Brunett (1998). Crisis Management: Strategic Considerations. According to Brunett, there are tasks and factors which comprise the ability of an organization to practice crisis management. There are four factors that hinder crisis

management including time pressure, control issues, threat level concerns, and response option constraints. Brunett claims that these factors disrupt the organization's ability to strategically focus on and manage a crisis. According to this model, only when these factors have been addressed can the management begin to provide solutions to the crisis.

Figure 1.1 Crisis Management: Strategic Considerations Model

Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT). The roots of Situational Crisis Communication Theory can be found in Attribution Theory. In the case of an organization, according to Coombs, stakeholders tend to make "attributions" or look for a cause during crises events. Coombs used Attribution Theory as basis to predict the severity of potential reputation threat a crisis may bring to an organization [10]. SCCT suggests that the crisis management team or the public information officers should weight the matching level of strategic crisis responses to the level of crisis responsibility and the reputation that the crisis might influence. According to Coombs, effective response depends on the proper assessment of the situation and the related reputational threat. SCCT rests on the assumption that an organization can easily identify the crisis outcome to the organizational reputation, behavioral intentions, etc. Coombs points out that the effectiveness of the crisis response is also influenced by how the organization managed the pre-crisis phrase and the post-crisis phase.
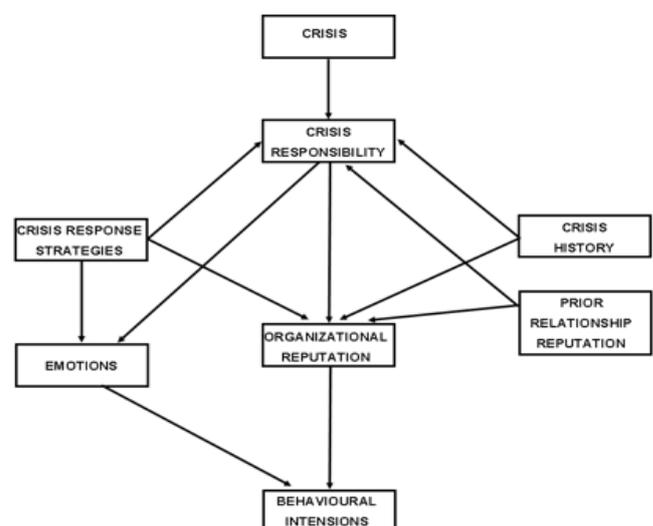

Figure 1.2 shows the Situational Crisis Communication Theory

Conceptual Framework

Crisis Management Strategic Consideration and Situational Crisis Communication Theory were combined to come up with a framework that will comprehensively explain the processes of how PIOs handle a certain crisis. The researcher was able to come up with a paradigm that described the flow of the study. The areas studied were the crises faced by Higher Education Institutions, the practices of the Public Information Officers in handling crisis, their best practices in managing crisis, as well as the outcomes of the said practices. With this, the researcher followed how the crisis affected the institution and what were the Public Information Officers' practices in handling their respective situation. The key informants are the Public Information Officers of Higher Education Institutions which encountered crisis from 2008-2018. In this case, the crises encountered included: Student Protests, Health Crisis, Off-campus tragedy, Black Propaganda against an official, and sex scandal. The following crises are the only applicable cases in the framework that was conceptualized as these contain unique and exclusive characteristics and aspects compared to all other crises encountered by the institutions. Student protests, for example, might garner attacks from the primary and largest number of internal stakeholders which can be overwhelming for PIOs to handle as this may mean that issues shall be handled with utmost care and sensitivity. Black propaganda and sex scandal are similar in a way that it targets the very reputation of individuals working for HEIs which can dismantle trust and organizational bond. Health crisis and off-campus tragedies are issues that are not easy to predict, and the cure would mean waiting for results from investigations and external institutions. Directly under the crises are the responsibilities of the institutions to respond to its Internal and External Stakeholders. Stemming from the crises, this would show how the crises have affected the stakeholders of the certain institution, and the responsibility of the institution to attend to the questions and needs of the stakeholders before, during, and after the crises. The crisis responsibility measure depends on the impact of the crisis, may it be internal stakeholders or external stakeholders, or both. Crises, primarily, target the stakeholders, as they are the ones who are more susceptible to wary changes in an institution. Internal Stakeholders are individuals who are primarily under the supervision of the institution, while external stakeholders are group of people who are not directly linked with the institution but is still connected with it one way or another. Based on Brunette's Crisis Management: Strategic Considerations, there are four factors that disrupt the ability of the PIOs in managing crisis: time pressure, control issues, response option constraints, and threat level concerns. Addressing these four factors, the PIO came up with the strategies and practices they employ. Response Option Constraints refer to the limitations of a PIO to respond to a crisis. This included the non-existence of PIO in an institution, which means that no working office handles the sole responsibility of attending to crisis and the media with no individual knowledgeable enough in attending to the stakeholders' needs, lack of spokesperson, and limited budget for the implementation of campaigns and programs. Control Issues refer to factors that affect the handling of crisis such as media angling and representation which are factors that cannot be meted by the institution as media have practices on how they angle certain issues; opinions of stakeholders when it comes to how issues are being handled;

and the quick spreading of issue through different medium. Time is always an enemy in all crises as there is a need to respond to crucial situations with immediacy and sensitivity. Factors that affected the practices are the following: need for immediate response and actions which could mean abrupt decision-making, and implementation of projects; fast-tracking of investigation and release of results; and ranking of priorities and attending to then in order. Threat level concerns refer to the additional risks posed by crisis such as its effect on reputation, image, and credibility of the institution. Once the said factors are properly addressed, according to Brunette, PIOs can strategically identify the practices to employ during crisis events. Practices are defined as any act done by the PIOs to resolve, cover, antagonize, and subvert the issue at hand to regain the reputation of the institution. This may mean that a communication campaigns are to be enacted, or a statement be released in order to handle the crises. Prioritizing, Stonewalling, Counter propaganda, SOP / Protocol and other immediate actions are among the practices that were employed by the institutions in handling the crises. Prioritizing means setting aside other factors and attending to the needs of individuals who are primarily affected of the crisis; Stonewalling means not replying to any issue and keeping mum on the crises at hand; Counter propaganda is a practice of releasing materials that would not directly attack the issue, but divert stakeholders' attention to a totally different topic; SOP/Protocol means following the prepared plans to resolve issues immediately. Meanwhile, applying the SCCT guided the researcher in identifying the crisis outcomes, effects, and behavioral intentions of the stakeholders. Through this SCCT, the researcher easily determined the best practices of Public Information Officers in managing a crisis. Combining all the factors that may affect a PIO's practice, the following incited positive effects not only on the organization but also to its stakeholders: well-thought-of communication campaigns that directly address problems; following protocol; active media connections that can easily share information to the general public; stonewalling; and counter propaganda that diverts people's attention from the crisis at hand. This model further guided the researcher in discerning how will these factors, when applied to the practices, affect the institution. Relatively, best practices have resulted to the following: maintained image and reputation of the institution and regained trust of stakeholders.
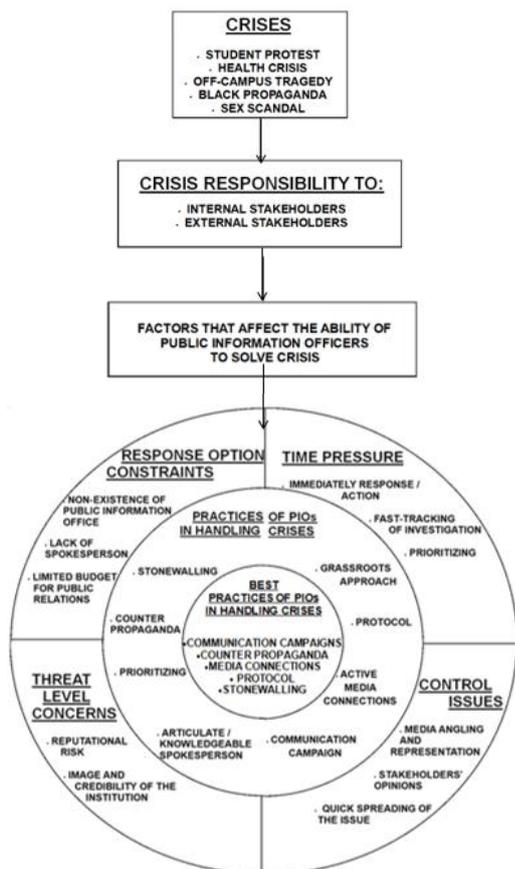
Figure 1.3 shows the application of Situational Crisis Communication Theory and Crisis Management: Strategic Considerations Model

3. Methodology

The type of research used is qualitative analysis. It is defined as "a systematic analysis of the content rather than the structure of a communication to determine the objective or meaning of the communication." According to Creswell (1998), a qualitative research enables the researcher to do a methodological process wherein the researcher must build a complex, holistic framework to interpret and analyze narrative observations, and conduct research in the habitat [11]. The study sought to know the best practices of public information officers in Higher Education Institutions in managing a crisis. To achieve the purpose of this study, it is better to get the perspectives of people who have a partaking role and have enough experience in the said field. There are many forms of qualitative analysis, but in this study, a case study took place. A case study allows an individual to have a descriptive record of another's experience and/or behavior that can be used in ways to help attain interferences about a developmental process, the impact of events, a person's level of functioning, and the origin disorders. The researcher used In-depth Interview in gathering data. In-depth Interview is a form of qualitative research that includes conducting data thorough individual interviews involving only a few numbers of respondents to discover their perspectives regarding a specific idea, program, or condition. It precedes a confidential and secure conversation between the interviewer and the key informant [12]. Participants of this study were chosen using Purposive Sampling. Purposive Sampling is a Non-Probability Sampling which is also known as

judgmental, selective, or subjective sampling. It is a sampling technique that relies on the researcher's judgment in choosing characteristics of a population and the objective of the study (Laerd Dissertation). Since the study involves Public Information Officers in different higher education institutions, the researcher chose only one informant to represent the institution. The researcher chose based on the need of the study and the availability of the prospects.

4. Results and Discussion

In qualifying "best", the researcher has used "Application of Strategic Crisis Communication and the Crisis Management: Strategic Considerations Model" to identify if the practice employed by the institution was a practice that should be shared within communities of public relations offices. Crisis management often includes several practices, some of which may be successful or not. It is important to evaluate every response in different situations. Many methods are appropriate to gauge how successful an organization's response may be. But researchers bewail the lack of a standardized method. An example of this method is to evaluate the crisis management in factors including checking the chain of command, flexibility of response methods, clear communication, and efficient resource allocation [13].

Having a Standard Operating Procedure / Protocol

Many times, organizations face a varying number and degree of crisis. Often, most of them are ill equipped and unprepared to face such scenarios. The absence of protocols and management plans often exacerbate the problem. Even if protocols are in place, subsequent problems lie within its execution. In assuring that an organization has a to-go plan in these emergencies, there are several factors and elements that should be considered in crafting protocols. Anticipating different varieties of crisis is important, as there is no general solution for all of them [14]. There should be a list of possible scenarios, but this list need not be exhaustive and specific. The responses should be 'modularized'—every step should be listed and ready to be activated once needed. There must also be a strong chain of command to assure a steady and authoritative approach on implementing crisis management protocols. The most important aspect of these protocols pertains to the communication strategies to be applied. A team must be identified to handle communication within internal and to external stakeholders. In different organizations and governmental agencies, a separate individual is appointed to be the spokesperson aside from the head of the agency. The spokesperson is an indispensable part of an organization who engages with external audiences. It is cited as the "face" of the organization. Spokespersons are responsible for communicating a message to the public. In times of crisis, it is critical that they are trained to face the media [14]. Usually, spokespersons are found to have extensive training with the media, and a long background with the organization being represented. Spokespersons must be trained and familiar with the basic principles of crisis and emergency risk communication (Oak Ridge Institute for Science and Education). They should play a role in developing messages so they can "own" them and deliver them well. Authenticity, relatability and credibility must exude from an institution's spokesperson to effectively convey what it wants to spread. However, although a spokesperson serves as the "face" of the organization during a crisis, having the head of the Institution or even a senior

management who can lend an air of authority when they talk to the media directly, sometimes all backfires. A usual example of this is the Mexican Gulf oil spill in 2010. Tony Hayward, the CEO of British Petroleum, handled all media queries by himself, to seemingly portray that the company is in control of the situation. However, he has made statements that have backfired. Mr. Hayward told the media that the Gulf of Mexico was "relatively tiny" compared with the "very big ocean". He also commented that he wanted the whole episode to be over, as he would like his life back. His statements were insensitive to the casualties of the said incident. It also elicited negative reactions from not only practitioners in the field, but also among BP stakeholders and even President Obama. This example perfectly illustrates the need for a spokesperson and the need for his skill to effectively engage with media personnel and stakeholders. In the end, these protocols won't work if it isn't tested beforehand. Regular simulations must be made to ensure efficiency. If in case a real crisis strikes, post-evaluation strategies are important to sift what's working and what's not among the crisis protocols.

Communication Campaigns as a way to combat 'bad' image

Time and experiences of different institutions have proven that projects and programs are always tantamount to success of an event. However, of course, this would be partnered with a very competent team and a working idea. However, this is not the case in most HEIs in the country. The very existence of a Public Information Office is still debatable in the country. Some HEIs do not have PIOs and some have very limited definition of what the PIO should do. Campaigns are often the main way that to interact with the public and get the organization's message out to people. It can mobilize people, pressure decision-makers, inform and educate the public, change behavior, and persuade to support. Campaigns are effective way to engage with stakeholders, not only in promotional purposes but also in crises and negative situation. Campaigns in negative situations should highlight the good. It should not exacerbate the problem but instead offer a solution to address the root problem. The stakeholders, both internal and external, must be able to connect to the campaign, and it must mobilize them to action. The team must monitor the progress of the campaign, to see if it moves in the right direction. Also, organizations must harness the power of new technologies such as social media. During crisis, communication campaign strategies used to produce an effect on the knowledge of the general populations on the attitudes and behavior of large populations across a variety of topics, including but not limited to political, pro-social, environmental, and health outcomes (Rice & Atkin, 2016). Public communications campaigns impart ideas for a strategic purpose and attempts to mold public opinion to a desired outcome. In carrying out a communication campaign, it is important to note many factors, like who are the different audiences, how to will reach those audiences and details of the message, the logistics, budgets and timeframes, details of who need to sign off the plan, and ways to monitor and capture data to evaluate the campaign's success. Time has proven that no event can shift a person's view overnight. With careful and meticulous actions, HEIs must target the media, opinion leaders, semantics, and psyche of students. Here, media has the highest reach as well as the parents who

are opinion leaders and individuals who are directly connected with students' psychology.

Prioritizing the welfare of internal stakeholders; Employing Grassroots Approach

Internal stakeholders are active warm bodies that comprise the community of an institution. A stakeholder is a person, a group, or an entity that has an interest in an organization or an institution. Stakeholders can affect, or be affected, by the actions, objectives, policies, and even mistakes that an organization makes. Knowing their preferences and attitudes enables an organization to bridge itself to the stakeholders. Before it can analyze the needs and wants, it should first identify different kinds of stakeholders: internal (those within the institution) and external (those who subscribe or use the organization's services from outside). Within internal and external stakeholders, there are different needs that administrators should recognize. These needs will break down further these people [15]. One way to further know, and to serve the stakeholders is to communicate with them directly, through their beliefs and preferences. This will make the stakeholders feel a personal connection to the institution. Also, stakeholder analysis helps to provide a more structured understanding of diverse groups and their preferences and ensure that different perspectives are considered. Different literatures have proven, time and again, that in times of severe crisis, internal stakeholders' welfare should be prioritized [16]. This practice is called grassroots approach. In using the grassroots approach, organizations will first tackle the root of the problem, or the people being affected by it. In communication, this is often utilized for advocacy campaigns, where people are mobilized by a single belief or idea [17]. Media has an indispensable role during times of crisis. For the organizations and institutions involved, it is an important medium to spread information immediately [18]. The media are critical in contributing objectively to the discussion over how to respond and ensuring communities which have access to information [19]. In times of mass hysteria, mass media plays a vital role providing information and making people aware of the situation, aside from calming the populace and encouraging them to do positive action or vice versa. Fatal accidents and tragedies are often an unwelcome development for an institution. In this era, three different sectors should be addressed in responding to the tragedy. First, government institutions who will instantaneously commence an investigation. Second, the news media, who would like to cover the event comprehensively. And third, the families of the victim, and other affected people such as co-workers, friends and witnesses [20]. There are suggested ways to effectively respond to these crises. Most importantly, a plan should be written beforehand, in case of emergencies. One stumbling block to this strategy is exemplified by an interview with a manager: "No one wants to plan what to do when a fatality occurs because they don't want it to happen in the first place" [21]. This strategy requires a protocol, laying out the persons involved in handling and publicizing the situation, a preferred method of reporting the emergency or accident, a list of contacts inside and outside the facility with telephone numbers for agencies and emergency personnel to be contacted, and procedures for employees who remain for shutdown of critical operations [20]. At the scene, assure that first aid and emergency services are being delivered and control should be exerted to avoid secondary

accidents. Witnesses should be identified, and the evidences preserved. At the office, make sure that the emergency plan is being carried out while information is gathered from the scene [22]. Investigation should commence within a short period of time. This is to ensure that the details are still fresh within the witnesses' mind. The investigation team must stick with the facts and not include speculation and opinion when determining the cause of the accident. The organization should also handle requests from third parties such as the equipment manufacturers, contractors, property owners, vendors, families, and attorneys who will be representing the injured or deceased employees. It is important to deal with these third parties, as they represent potential financial and legal liability to the institution [20]. Inside the institution, the death of a colleague or co-stakeholder would surely affect the other stakeholders. Aside from constant updates, debriefings and other forms of psychosocial support are important to encompass all stakeholders, ensuring their mental health [21]. Human resource professionals inside the organization are tasked to lead this stage of ensuring that work performance isn't affected, while preserving the emotional links between different stakeholders. Then, analysis should be done by the institution to prevent tragedies from happening again.

Active Connections with the Media

Media has an indispensable role during times of crisis. For the organizations and institutions involved, it is an important medium to immediately spread information [18]. The media are critical in objectively contributing to the discussion over how to respond and ensuring communities who have access to information [19]. Unfortunately, reports may get facts wrong, report rumors, or spread misinterpretations. Notably, social media posts are unfiltered, and often include inaccurate and unchecked information. These mistakes may not only harm the public, they can also undermine the credibility of an organization or institution. Also, the media must consider factors in reporting a certain event These all have an effect on the public's perception of events reported by the media, and how media itself reports these. Thus, it is an imperative to uphold the standards of journalism and avoid unethical practices such as sensationalism and prejudice-spreading during times of crisis [19]. However, too much closeness and connection with the media can result to overfamiliarity. Meaning, media people can also take advantage of the HEIs.

Stonewalling

Although Stonewalling is effective during the crisis, stonewalling is not always the answer to crisis. Transparency is always seen a responsibility of institutions to its stakeholders. It opens doors and opportunities for internal and external stakeholders. It implies visibility into the workings of an institution for its stakeholders. It should be institutionalized in every organization. It is also about putting out facts in the offing, even if it is uncomfortable for the organization. Transparency not only helps build relationships with external stakeholders but also fortifies those with internal ones. Morale and self-confidence of employees are found to be higher in more transparent companies and organizations. Innovation isn't stalled and employee engagement is being increased when stakeholders perceive transparency as an important part of the institution. Omission and issues that are not being solved or answer

publicly are lying and may tamper the credibility of the institutions. This might also result to grapevine communication where in statements can be twisted, which may be not in favor of the HEI. Grapevine communication is a form of informal communication within organizations and institutions. Informal communication is characterized by free-flowing discussion and a non-adherence to rules. Peppered with gossip and rumors, grapevine communication is any form that is not sanctioned by the organization. It can take on many forms, such as linear, to more complex flows. It is the basic form of communication co-workers and colleagues do in an institution. Grapevine communication spreads rapidly and likely touches each person throughout the organization (5 Challenges of Grapevine Communication [And 5 Solutions]). It could also be seen in macro-level venues, such as villages and towns, where news spreads through person-to-person communication.

Counter Propaganda as Diversionary Tactic

Common among the HEIs interviewed was the exercise of publicizing and disseminating counter propaganda, may it be in line or not in line with the issue at hand. Counterpropaganda found its roots in political and institutional parlance. Counterpropaganda often targets many goals in one stone. First, it counters other propaganda which it deems untrue or damaging. Second, it undermines the credibility and the authoritativeness of the other party. It is a measure to portray opposing sides as false and instructing the target audience to think against the original propaganda sent (Powerbase). It often takes on the form of the original propaganda, basing itself on its principles and using the same elements [23]. In government and businesses alike, diversionary tactics have been used for selfish gains. Often, the intricacies of the legal system and the bureaucracy have been used as tactics to prolong or stall intended goals. In business, it has been long used to fool people, often to gain their trust and make choices unwillingly and unwittingly. No research can support these claims that counter propaganda work, however, this has somehow worked and shifted internal stakeholders' views. With these, there is a budding image of HEIs which are doing its job of providing quality education to students amidst issues.

5. Conclusion

Based on the input of the key informants, the researchers came up with the following conclusions:

1. That every institution is vulnerable to crisis; that any size of crisis has direct impact in both internal and external stakeholders; that crisis does not have a "structure". Unlike incidents, crisis is sudden, unpredictable, or unexpected situations that are often produced by an unforeseen combination of interdependent risk, or risks that had not been identified. Thus, HEIs must always be ready to act during crisis communication; as every crisis is diverse, there are different ways of coping with it. Thus, HEIs must plan proactively to easily handle the issue;

2. Best practices of an institution would depend on how fast they respond to a crisis. As every crisis is unique, the need to assess the situation as fast as they could is prerequisite to responding to crisis successfully;

3. Most of the threats of the crisis target reputation. Therefore, it is important that public information

officers be concerned with how it would always protect and secure the reputation of the University;

4. In controlling the spread of the issues, it is evident with all the practices done by HEIs that there is a need for stronger connections with the media as this has the highest and widest reach to change the public's perception;

2. In terms of the best practices, in some universities, president being the spokesperson is an advantage or the best practice, but it may also be a detriment for the organization or may even cause further problems for the institution;

3. Stonewalling approach, though effective for some institutions, is not always the answer to crisis. Omission and issues that are not being solved or answered publicly are lying and may tamper the credibility of the institutions. This might also result to grapevine communication where in statements can be twisted, which may not be in favor of the HEI. Being transparent is always seen as a responsibility of institutions to its stakeholders;

4. Time and experiences of different institutions have proven that big budgeted projects and programs are always tantamount to success of an event. However, this should be partnered with a very competent team and a working idea;

5. During fatal accidents and tragedies, prioritizing stakeholders by addressing the root of the problem, or the people being affected by it is one of the most effective practices. Communicating with the internal stakeholders directly through their beliefs and preferences make them feel that they have a personal connection to the institution;

6. Lastly, although active connections with the media have an advantage during crisis, it may also result to overfamiliarity.

6. Recommendation

To the Higher Education Institutions. The researcher of this study highly recommends for them to have a crisis management team and strategic communication team who will proactively plan on the possible crisis or issues that a university may face.

To the Government. The researcher recommends supporting the universities and colleges with the best effort they can provide in empowering the universities' communication. The researcher recommends to the Commission on Higher Education to assess the need for requiring every universities and colleges to have their own crisis management team, and the Philippine Information Agency to consider providing free training for communication officers.

To the Future Researchers. It is recommended that the future researchers interested in the field of study to take advantage of the opportunities that this study can give them and to develop further studies that would improve other existing researches.

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