



Case Study of Organizational Crisis Communication: Oxfam Responds to Sexual Harassment and Abuse Scandal

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Introduction

NGOs provide vital services to communities in crises. Yet, sometimes they face crises of their own (see Gibelman and Gelman 2004). On February 9, 2018, Oxfam GB came under intense public scrutiny after *The Times* (O'Neill 2018a, b) alleged that the organization had covered up sexual harassment and abuse perpetrated by its staff in Haiti from 2010 to 2011. The crisis led to parliamentary hearings, official investigations, resignations of Oxfam executives, and the loss of 7,000 regular donors, among others (BBC 2018).

The #MeToo movement has gained momentum after prominent women broke their silence about sexual harassment and abuse in the film industry in October 2017. Following, women across the world took to social media to share their stories and named abusers (Zacharek et al. 2017). In consequence, beside powerful individuals, corporations, and public authorities, NGOs have also been at the center of a wave of scandals (Beaumont and Ratcliffe 2018). These crises critically undermine trust in NGOs, which commonly provide services to the most vulnerable populations,

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including women and children. What's more, because they depend on the support of multiple stakeholder groups, including governments, donors, partner organizations, and volunteers, organizational crises caused by misconduct can be particularly severe for NGOs.

While organizational wrongdoing ultimately demands change and corrective action, effective and ethical crisis communication is essential. The practice of crisis management focuses on alleviating impacts of crises on the organization and others. This includes crisis prevention and preparedness, crisis response, and postcrisis management (Institute for Public Relations 2007). This case study applies crisis communication theory, particularly the Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT), to analyze how Oxfam addressed the recent sexual harassment and abuse scandal. More specifically, it focuses on the organization's response and provides insights into important considerations for NGOs in crisis.

Crises and the Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT)

Coombs (2012) defined crises as “the perception of an unpredictable event that threatens important expectancies of stakeholders and can seriously impact an organization's performance and generate negative outcomes” (pp. 2–3). According to the premise that crises are perceptual, they arise when enough stakeholders view a situation as problematic, whether the organization agrees or not. Other scholars have focused on crises as revolving around so-called legitimacy gaps (Sethi 1977), which occur when publics perceive that the organization's actions are not aligned with their expectations, norms, and values. The wave of recent scandals around past cases of sexual abuse and harassment indicates a change in public expectations toward organizational behavior and policies. Once legitimacy gaps arise, organizations need to find ways to realign themselves with norms and values they are perceived to have violated (for instance, Hearit 1995).

The Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) developed by Coombs (2007) continues to be the most influential crisis communication framework to date (see Ma and Zhan 2016). SCCT holds that if the level of attribution of responsibility toward the organization for a crisis is high, then the reputational threat to the organization is high and vice versa. In other words, if the organization is viewed as at fault, the crisis will have a bigger impact on its reputation. SCCT then clusters crises into three crisis types on a continuum from low to high levels of responsibility: victim, accident, and preventable crises (Coombs 2012). When attacked by hackers, for instance, the organization may be viewed as bearing little responsibility for the situation (victim). A tragic fire may not have been caused by wrongdoing or neglect (accident), and when organizational members commit fraud, the crisis would have been preventable.

In any crisis, SCCT advises organizations to prioritize messages that (a) prevent harm to people and the environment and (b) explain how and why the situation occurred and what the organization is doing to prevent similar situations from occurring in the future. To restore an organization's reputation, however, the theory asserts that response strategies be selected according to crisis type to be effective (see

Coombs 2007). Specifically, Coombs' (2012) drew on established rhetorical strategies of image restoration (see Benoit 1997) and categorized them according to the level of responsibility they accept. First, *denial postures* include messages aimed at attacking the accuser, denial, and scapegoating. These messages accept the least amount of responsibility and are most appropriate for crises caused by unfounded rumors, among others. Second, *diminishment postures* focus on excusing and justifying, which includes "minimizing the organization's responsibility" and "the perceived damage" (p. 155) and are best suited for accident crises. Third, *rebuilding postures* focus on apology and corrective action. They accept the highest amount of responsibility and are most appropriate for preventable crises. Finally, *bolstering postures* remind stakeholders of the value of the organization's work, praise stakeholders, and/or emphasize how the organization is also a victim. These strategies can be used in combination with other strategies. However, victimage postures are only appropriate when the organization faces a victim crisis (Coombs 2012).

Finally, SCCT established two intensifying factors – crisis history and prior reputation – that also influence the attribution of responsibility toward an organization. Accordingly, if an organization has a negative reputation and/or a history of similar crises, it will be less likely perceived as bearing low levels of responsibility, even in a genuine victim or accident crisis. In such cases, stakeholders tend to treat a victim crisis as an accident crisis and an accident crisis as a preventable crisis. Thus, depending on their prior reputation and crisis history, organizations have more or less latitude when crafting crisis responses (Coombs 2012). Indicating the complexity of crisis situations, scholars have further identified additional variables that impact the effect of crisis messages, such as communication channels (Liu et al. 2011) or individual's locus of control (Claeys et al. 2010).

Overall, empirical studies have provided strong evidence for the tenets of SCCT (for instance, Coombs and Holladay 2002; Jeong 2009). Recent research, however, indicates that even well-matched crisis responses have comparably lower effects on organizational reputation than the type of crisis (see Ma and Zhan 2016). Yet, a poor crisis response, or lack thereof, can cause severe additional damage (see Coombs 2016; Grebe 2013). While SCCT thus provides important guidelines, initial crisis communication tactics should not be viewed as magic bullets that replace long-term efforts to rebuild trust.

Case Study: Oxfam in Crisis

Organizational Background

In 1995, Oxfam was founded by several NGOs to increase their "impact on the international stage to reduce poverty and injustice" (Oxfam n.d., para 1). Beside its International Secretariat (or Oxfam International) headquartered in Oxford, its member organizations, including Oxfam GB, operate independently in 20 countries. The organizations' work focuses on combatting poverty and hunger through

empowerment, providing disaster relief and emergency response, as well as advocacy for social justice, including equality, sustainability, and women's rights.

Oxfam GB employs approximately 5,000 people (Oxfam 2017). In 2015/2016, more than 31,000 volunteers supported its work (Oxfam n.d.). Donations and retail operations each made up approximately 28% of its total 2016/2017 income of £406.8 million. 43% was generated from governments and public authorities (Oxfam 2017). At the onset of the crisis, Oxfam GB's most visible spokespersons included CEO Mark Goldring and the Chair of the Board of Trustees Caroline Thompson. Chief Executive Director Winnie Byanyima represented Oxfam International.

Headlines had come to question Oxfam's legitimacy before. In October 2017, after the release of Oxfam's annual report, several news articles (Bacchi 2017; Watt 2017) reported the dismissal of 22 Oxfam staff members "over allegations of sexual abuse" (para 1) and "87 claims of sexual exploitation and abuse involving its workers" (para 5). These reports, however, did not create a crisis for the organization back then. In 2014, Oxfam GB's former counter-fraud director was convicted of fraud. He had enriched himself with payments adding up to £65,000 (BBC 2014). Fraud has also been a repeated issue as several of its annual reports showed lost funds of over £400,000 due to fraudulent activities (for instance, Austin 2018). The crisis history likely created a perception of a potentially problematic organizational culture at the onset of this crisis.

The Crisis Situation and the Consequences

On October 5, 2011, Oxfam International issued a little-noticed press release. The organization reported the results of an internal investigation, which had found that "a small number of its staff members working in Haiti" (para 1) had violated the organization's code of conduct, undermined the organization's reputation, abused power, and engaged in bullying. While the press release did not specify the type of misconduct, it stated that these employees had already left Haiti and no longer worked for Oxfam (Oxfam International 2011).

Seven years later, on February 9, 2018, *The Times*' cover read "Top Oxfam staff paid Haiti survivors for sex. Charity covered up scandal in earthquake zone. Girls at 'Caligula orgy' may have been underage" (O'Neill 2018b). Below the headline, the newspaper placed a large picture of the director of Oxfam's operations in Haiti, Roland Van Hauwemeiren, who was at the center of the scandal. Oxfam thus faced a preventable crisis caused by organizational decisions and actions on two levels: first, sexual misconduct by employees and, second, mishandling of the misconduct by the organization.

Initial consequences included the resignation of Oxfam's Deputy Chief Executive Penny Lawrence, official investigations by the British Charity Commission and Haiti's government, and threats from the European Commission to withdraw its funding. Haiti suspended Oxfam GB from operating in the country for the duration of its investigation (Almasy 2018), and Oxfam's leadership agreed to abstain from

applying for public grants in the UK until it could show significant improvements (Slawson 2018). What's more, Desmond Tutu and Minnie Driver publicly cut all ties with the organization, Oxfam's leadership testified in front of the International Development Committee, and the organization lost approximately 7,000 regular donors within just 11 days (BBC 2018). While the Charity Commission's inquiry is still ongoing at this time, Oxfam CEO Mark Goldring announced his resignation by the end of the year in May 2018 (Rawlinson 2018).

Oxfam Responds

Phase 1: Explanations and Justifications. Best practices of crisis communication include timeliness, honesty, and consistency (Coombs 2012). Oxfam GB and Oxfam International responded within hours of the publication of *The Times'* article. The early responses, however, indicate that Oxfam's leadership may have underestimated how the public and the press viewed this crisis. They also showed a lack of consistency between Oxfam International's and Oxfam's GB's statements. Oxfam GB's (2018a, b) first statements condemned the misconduct as "totally unacceptable" and focused on explaining and justifying how the organization had handled the incidents in 2011. In addition, the statements informed the public about measures, which had been put in place as a direct result of the 2011 investigation; a safeguarding team and a whistle-blower hotline. Stating that Oxfam GB (2018b) "hopes that they (our supporters) will be reassured by the steps we have taken" (para 7), the organization indicated that it believes it had sufficiently addressed any past shortcomings. Oxfam International's (2018a) February 9 press release applied a less defensive strategy and acknowledged failure, which undermined Oxfam GB's message. After condemning sexual misconduct and reiterating the organization's stance against exploitation and abuse, the statement admitted that "[...] we have not done enough to change our own culture and to create the strongest possible policies to prevent harassment and protect people we work with around the world" (para 4). In addition, it mentioned that more cases of sexual harassment have recently surfaced at Oxfam.

Its global structure composed of Oxfam International and its independent national organizations resulted in several spokespersons from two structurally separate entities engaging in a public response at the onset of the crisis. Adding to inconsistencies and a multitude of voices was Oxfam GB's former CEO Dame Barbara Stocking who appeared on BBC Newsnight (2018) on February 10. Stocking had headed the organization in 2011 and fiercely defended the decisions made at the time without showing a hint of regret to the visible disbelief of the interviewer. Meanwhile, Oxfam's current CEO Goldring also gave press interviews. Still refusing to acknowledge that the misconduct had been addressed insufficiently, he issued a first narrow apology that mirrored sentiments of the statements from the prior day. "What I'm apologizing for," Goldring (cited from Guardian News 2018, 0:17) stated in off-the-cuff remarks, "is that nine Oxfam staff behaved in a way that was totally unacceptable and contrary to our values."

These first statements did not settle the situation. The public and press primarily seemed to judge this crisis as preventable, based on the perception that Oxfam had failed to handle sexual harassment and abuse appropriately and seriously enough. Oxfam GB's early focus on justifications and excuses – strategies most appropriate for accident and victim crises – did not address these concerns. Goldring (cited from Aitkenhead 2018) himself reflected on this dynamic in a now infamous interview; “What I felt really clearly is many people haven't wanted to listen to explanations” (para 4).

Crises can be fast-paced, dynamic, and unpredictable. Oxfam soon found itself facing a constantly shifting rhetorical situation. During the following two days, the organization issued two more statements (Oxfam International 2018b, c) in response to news reports, which had cast further doubt on the organization's handling of sexual harassment and abuse. *The Times* (O'Neill 2018c) reported that the employees who had resigned and were fired in 2011 simply took jobs with other aid agencies. News also surfaced that Van Hauwemeiren had been accused of similar misconduct on Oxfam's premises in Chad in 2006 (Ratcliffe and Quinn 2018). Adding to these revelations, the Charity Commission for England and Wales (2018), which registers and regulates charities, publicly responded to the emerging scandal; “Our approach to this matter would have been different had the full details that have been reported been disclosed to us at the time” (para 3). This statement cast further doubt on Oxfam GB's assurances that it had handled the incidents appropriately. Under mounting pressure, Oxfam shifted its response from a diminishment to a rebuilding posture.

Phase 2: Corrective Action, Apologies, and Resignations. On February 11, the Chair of Oxfam GB's Board of Trustees (cited from Oxfam 2018g) admitted in a press release that further improvement was necessary. Thompson apologized “unreservedly” (para 2) and assured that Oxfam would “fully learn the lessons of events in 2011” (para 3) by strengthening staff vetting and training and by extending reviews of its practices, among others. Oxfam International Executive Director Winnie Byanyima published a video statement that mirrored the acknowledgement of shortcomings and announced new initiatives (Oxfam International 2018e). These were later spelled out in a “comprehensive action plan to stamp out abuse” (Oxfam 2018d) aimed at increasing transparency and accountability as well as improving Oxfam's policies, practices, and culture (Oxfam International 2018f). Among others, these measures included an independent commission headed by women's rights activists (Oxfam International 2018g). The acknowledgments and repentant tone were promptly supported with the resignation of Oxfam GB's Deputy Chief Executive. “As programme director at the time,” Penny Lawrence was quoted in two identical releases (Oxfam 2018c; Oxfam International 2018d), “I am ashamed that this happened on my watch and I take full responsibility” (para 4).

The organization followed up on the high-profile resignation with an open letter of apology signed by Goldring and Thompson and published in *The Guardian* and *The Times* on February 17, 2018 (see Sampson 2018). The letter was also posted in Oxfam stores (Ferguson 2018). The leaders explicitly apologized to “Oxfam

supporters, friends and volunteers, [...]” as well as “to the people of Haiti and other places where the conduct of Oxfam staff has been reprehensible” (para 1) for misconduct and for the organization’s failure to report the incidents accurately. Stating in bold letters that “We are listening” (para 4), they assured readers that Oxfam continues to work “hard to rebuild” (para 5) trust and reiterated the major initiatives to prevent similar wrongdoing in the future. In closing, the letter applied a strategy of bolstering by praising the “amazing, brave, committed staff and volunteers who are making remarkable life-saving, life-changing work happen in desperate situations” (para 9) and reminding readers of Oxfam’s good work.

Placing a full-page ad in a high-profile newspaper is a risky choice for an NGO in a crisis. An ad provides full control over the content. However, spending a charity’s money on what may be perceived as “just PR” could lead to further backlash during crises. Oxfam addressed possible concerns with a disclaimer on the bottom of the letter; “Private donors who wish to remain anonymous have kindly paid for this message” (para 13). What’s more, Liu et al. (2011) have shown that publics are least likely to accept accommodative (or rebuilding) crisis messages when they are delivered via traditional media.

According to SCCT, rhetorical strategies of apology paired with corrective action are more appropriate to address this preventable crisis. Inconsistencies, however, continued to undermine Oxfam’s attempts to restore its reputation. Particularly, Goldring’s (cited from Aitkenhead 2018) statements in an interview with *The Guardian*, which preceded the open letter of apology by a day, further fueled the crisis:

The intensity and the ferocity of the attack makes you wonder, what did we do? We murdered babies in their cots? Certainly, the scale and the intensity of the attacks feels out of proportion to the level of culpability. I struggle to understand it. You think, ‘My God, there’s something going on there.’ (para 11)

This unfortunate quote quickly made headlines (for instance, Swinford and Bird 2018). It distracted from the official apology, and the posture of victimage and articulated lack of understanding for the public outrage directly contradicted any official expression of remorse. It hence cast a shadow on the sincerity of Oxfam’s public apologies, and Goldring’s interview had created an additional preventable issue that now needed to be addressed.

Despite the public outcry over this statement, Oxfam continued its rebuilding strategy. Leading up to the parliamentary hearing in London, the organization published its 2011 report (Oxfam 2018f), apologized to Haiti’s government, and met with government officials in the country. The report revealed that Oxfam staff members under investigation had physically threatened witnesses. A few days later, Haiti suspended Oxfam’s operations in the country for the duration of its own investigation (Almasy 2018).

When Goldring, Byanyima, and Thompson faced the parliamentary commission on February 20 (see International Development Committee 2018), the organization

was still under intense public scrutiny and criticism. The three leaders reiterated their apologies, committed to measures of improvement, and shared recently reported information on additional cases of sexual harassment within the organization. Prompted by a committee member, Goldring also apologized for his prior remarks in *The Guardian*. This part of the hearing captured significant media attention (for instance, Reuters 2018; Smout 2018).

While public attention to the scandal peaked on February 12, the intensity slowly decreased after the parliamentary hearing on February 20 (see Fig. 1) and remained low. This, however, did not mean that Oxfam could go back to business as usual as its reputation had significantly suffered. What’s more, other NGOs had now also come under scrutiny for similar issues (Beaumont and Ratcliffe 2018). Addressing the sector-wide issue, Goldring signed an open letter of apology with leaders from 21 other UK aid agencies, including Save the Children, UNICEF, and World Vision. The letter, published in the Huffington Post, stated:

As aid agencies we will take every step to right our wrongs and eradicate abuse within our industry. We are truly sorry that at times our sector has failed. We must and will do better. (Goldring et al. 2018, para 1–2)

The organizations further announced joint efforts to improve safeguarding, referencing systems, and reporting to authorities and agencies. In addition, the leaders reiterated their intentions to work with regulators to overcome “barriers to rigorous background checks in the UK.” (para 7). Joining a large group of affected NGOs and communicating jointly allowed Oxfam to transcend its isolated status in the public arena.

Oxfam now also had to follow up on its promises. In March, Oxfam International (2018h) appointed the co-chairs and members of the Independent Commission charged with developing recommendations for creating “a culture of zero tolerance

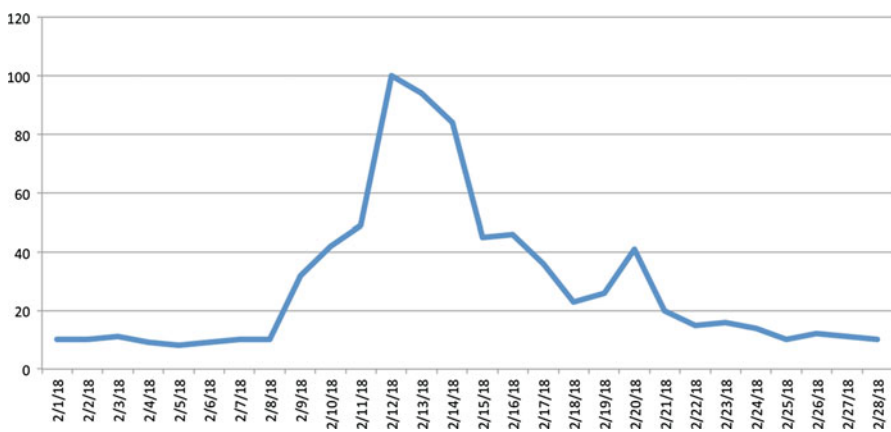


Fig. 1 Interest over time relative to the maximum search interest (100) based on google searches for “Oxfam” in the United Kingdom from February 1 to 28, 2018

for any kind of sexual harassment, abuse or exploitation” (para 8) within the organization and industry. In addition, both Oxfam International and Oxfam GB continue to report updates about ongoing efforts on their websites (Oxfam International 2018f, i; Oxfam 2018e).

While April and March remained relatively calm, Goldring announced his resignation on May 16 by the end of 2018 (Rawlinson 2018). Indeed, while he had joined Oxfam two years after the incidents and internal investigation in question, the few but prominent errors at the onset of the crisis damaged his credibility. This, in turn, likely undermined his ability to lead efforts to restore Oxfam GB’s reputation as one of its most visible spokespersons. Whether remaining in this role until the end of the year will be beneficial for the organization’s recovery in the public eye or not remains an open question.

Conclusion

In our current times, many organizations will need to revisit their past and present policies, actions, and decisions regarding sexual harassment and abuse. The case of Oxfam’s crisis shows that NGOs can face high-stakes crises even around issues that they may view as matters of the past. Oxfam GB initially got overwhelmed with the sudden scandal over its handling of sexual abuse and harassment in 2011. Its early messages focused on excusing and justifying past decisions and fell short to address the core of the preventable crisis. Under growing pressure, the organization eventually had to apologize and focus on corrective action.

Early inconsistencies caused by shifting strategies, multiple spokespersons and postures of victimage, however, continued to undermine the organization’s ability to get a handle on the situation and regain trust. The early statements came to provide a backdrop upon which any apology would be interpreted. Further, with public interest peaking three days after the onset of the scandal, stakeholders might remember Oxfam’s earlier messages more than its official apology. Had the organization been able to accurately assess the situation as a preventable crisis and responded with a consistent rebuilding strategy right away, its crisis communication might have been more effective.

Oxfam’s structure with many independent affiliate organizations, not too different from other global NGOs, increased challenges for consistent crisis responses. At the same time, stakeholders will be unlikely to distinguish separate entities under the same “brand.” A crisis for one member organization might quickly undermine the reputation of all affiliates and require each to communicate within their areas of operation. NGOs are thus well advised to develop strong crisis protocols and invest in crisis preparedness beyond the boundaries of each individual member organization.

Oxfam’s errors also underline necessary crisis communication expertise. NGOs, particularly charities, are more constrained when seeking external crisis counsel, as investments in “public relations” may be perceived negatively and further fuel the crisis. As part of proper pre-crisis planning and preparedness (see Coombs 2006),

NGOs should ensure that their leadership and communication staff are well-versed, trained, and experienced in crisis communication.

Finally, crises also provide opportunities for renewal and social change. Transitioning into a phase of postcrisis communication (Ulmer et al. 2007), Oxfam can now better itself as it continues to regain trust. To prevent future crises and beyond, other NGOs should take the wave of recent scandals as an impetus for reflection on their own cultures and policies.

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