Proactive Protection: A Proposal to Create a Comprehensive Crisis Communication Plan for Blacksburg Transit

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Table of Contents

Executive Summary

This project proposal serves as an introduction and roadmap for creating a crisis communication plan for Blacksburg Transit (BT), located in Montgomery County, Virginia. Currently operating with no official crisis communication plan, BT's reputation and functionality would benefit from a detailed, specific, proactive plan that outlines actionable steps in the event of a crisis. This project will result in a complete crisis communication plan in which all of BT's relevant employees will have access to for training and preparation. The plan will include crisis response steps, internal and external contact information, sample messages, a list of questions the media might have during a press conference, and evaluation forms.

Due to the rapidly evolving nature of stakeholder needs and expectations in a fast-paced, social-mediated world, creating a crisis communication plan that prepares BT for all stages of a crisis (pre-crisis, crisis, and post crisis) is essential, not only for the transportation industry, but for all sectors. The importance of a crisis communication plan for a high-stakes industry like the transportation industry rests on the fact that unplanned events will occur; and therefore, the more prepared BT is, the more likely it is to mitigate reputational damage.

Organization Background

Organization's Purpose

BT provides transit services to Blacksburg, Virginia Tech (VT), and surrounding communities in Montgomery County and Christiansburg. It has multiple different services, including fixed-route and deviated-fixed-route bus services and special event services. BT is currently funded through federal and state grants, partnerships and advertising, and VT student activity fees. And its operations are embedded as a part of the Town of Blacksburg government (Town of Blacksburg, 2018). It provides service over a 28 square mile area and has

approximately 279 stops. In addition, its ridership in fiscal year 2017 exceeded 3.7 million trips (Town of Blacksburg, 2018).

Mission and Vision

According to *BT Mission & Commitment* (n.d.), its mission is to provide "safe, courteous, reliable, accessible and affordable public transportation to the citizens of Blacksburg, Virginia Tech, and partnering communities within the New River Valley" (NRV). As noted from the same source:

> We are committed to Safety, Courtesy, Reliability and the Environment. We are committed to seek innovative solutions to enhance or expand service to meet the needs of our communities. We are committed to seek creative solutions to our current and future funding challenges.

BT's 2024 Strategic Plan does not have a direct strategic vision statement. However, it has four primary goals that guide BT's (future) service and operations. As directly quoted from Town of Blacksburg (2024), the goals are as follows:

1. Provide an effective and safe transit service that meets the needs of the Town of Blacksburg, the Town of Christiansburg, and the surrounding communities
2. Ensure system and route optimization through proactive planning and consistent data collection
3. Provide excellent customer service and improve the rider experience
4. Deepen coordination with Virginia Tech and foster connections within the student population

History

BT's history is marked with some important advances across its generational timeline. These advances are highlighted in their 2018 Development Plan. In 1983, BT was first established as a department of the Town of Blacksburg in which its first fixed routes served campus and town. Shortly after, BT Access paratransit was introduced. In the mid-1980s, its routes expanded to Montgomery Regional Hospital and parts of VT's campus. By 1991, BT introduced its first service outside Blacksburg through the Two Town Trolley. In addition, the organization moved into a dedicated facility.

In the mid-1990s, the first real-time tracking system emerged, setting a standard for modern automated vehicle location systems. A few years later in 1998, BT received its low-floor, wheelchair-accessible buses to accommodate disabled riders.

At the turn of the century, BT received a statewide public transportation award for service excellence in 2001.

Later, in 2009, BT launched its service in Christiansburg and the BT4U predicted-departure system, a further advancement into modern bus tracking. As technology advanced through the 2010s, BT participated in the Transit Investment in Greenhouse Gas and Energy Reduction (TIGGER) emissions-reductions systems by adding hybrid articulated buses (2010-2013). During this time in 2012, the Regional Transit Coordinating Council (RTCC) was created "to provide increased dialogue and coordination among regional transit providers" (Town of Blacksburg, 2018, p. 20).

In 2017, BT received the Outstanding Public Transportation Marketing Award for "Drive for BT" campaign, a significant achievement for the organization's reputation.

From 2016 and onward, BT has committed to transitioning to an all-electric fleet by fiscal year 2035 and is planning to have a Multimodal Transit Facility (Town of Blacksburg,

2024). This facility "will become the new major transfer point for BT service on the Virginia Tech campus, along with Squires on Alumni Mall" (Town of Blacksburg, 2018, p. 134).

Structure and Governance

BT is administered by the seven-member Blacksburg Town Council, which sets policy and approves BT's budget (Town of Blacksburg, 2018). VT funds most of BT's expenses: "BT received over $3.1 million in operating funds from Virginia Tech, representing approximately half of all annual external funding for the agency" in fiscal year 2017 (Town of Blacksburg, 2018, p. 22). BT receives no general fund subsidy, and besides VT's funding of BT, the organization receives state transit grants, partnerships, and advertising for financial support as well.

The Transit Director along with six departmental managers oversee 29 full-time and 12 part-time administrative employees. In addition, they manage 7 full-time and 145 part-time bus operators (Town of Blacksburg, 2018). BT also has six departments that it is divided into: Operations, Maintenance, Finance, Regulatory, ITS, and Marketing. Most bus operators are part-time, making Blacksburg Transit a major employer of Virginia Tech students (Town of Blacksburg, 2018).

BT runs a variety of routes, including its main fixed-route system, several modified fixed-route services, and demand-response programs like BT Access for riders with disabilities and the Go Anywhere service in Christiansburg (Town of Blacksburg, 2024; Town of Blacksburg, 2018). In Blacksburg, service operates at different levels (Full, Intermediate, and Reduced) based on the Virginia Tech academic calendar (Town of Blacksburg, 2018).

Stakeholders

BT collaborates with multiple partners and stakeholders. First, Virginia Tech provides approximately half of the system's funding and collaborates on major planning projects, such as the Multimodal Transit Facility. Next, the Town of Blacksburg governs BT and provides policy oversight (Town of Blacksburg, 2018). Christiansburg and Montgomery County aid with regional planning and fund service extensions (Town of Blacksburg, 2024). The New River Valley Metropolitan Planning Organization (NRVMPO) is another crucial stakeholder, as it "is the transportation policymaking organization serving the Towns of Blacksburg and Christiansburg, the City of Radford, and parts of Montgomery and Pulaski Counties" (Town of Blacksburg, 2018, p. 22).

Riders are one of the most important stakeholders, as they are the consumers of BT's services. Roughly two-thirds of riders are VT students, with staff and local residents making up the rest of the rider population (Town of Blacksburg, 2018).

Finally, BT has other regional transit partners, including Radford Transit, Pulaski Area Transit, Smart Way, and Virginia Breeze. These partnerships exist to expand regional mobility by creating transfer opportunities that connect Blacksburg riders to destinations outside BT's service area (Town of Blacksburg, 2024). Maintaining a relationship with these partners allows transfers across the region (Town of Blacksburg, 2024).

It is important to note that stakeholder engagement was formally built into the 2024 Transit Strategic Plan through workshops and local government coordination.

Communication Efforts

BT uses multiple channels to communicate with riders, including its website, the BT app, telephone, email, and social media (*Feedback*, n.d.; *Rider Tools*, n.d.). Its website provides live maps, trip planning, service alerts, and news releases (*Feedback*, n.d.). Its app has live bus and

trip-planning tools (*Rider Tools*, n.d.). As for telephone, it has an automated system that provides departure information, along with a telephone number for inquiries. BT's riders can send feedback or complaints to ridebt@blacksburg.gov (*Feedback*, n.d.). Finally, social media allows BT to communicate real-time updates and engage with its riders, through Bluesky, Facebook, Instagram, and X. The consistent use of web, app, phone, and social media allows BT to disseminate urgent information quickly, which is critical during service disruptions or emergencies.

Research Plan

Blacksburg Transit (BT) has a short internal document that gives minimal instructions on what actions to take amid unplanned events. This document is titled, "Unplanned Events—Procedure," It does not operate as a crisis communication plan. Rather, BT's staff possess crisis response rather than having it in written policy. The research plan proposes interviews with employees inside the organization to learn how BT's communication works. Employees will be able to describe their own experiences in their own words, which will help with the formulation of a crisis communication plan.

Semi-structured interviews will be used to keep a consistent set of core questions, while still leaving space for follow-up questions and stories. This method works well when participants have a variety of job roles and responsibilities. Interviews will take place either in person at BT's facility or over Zoom. In-person interviews will be favored due to more natural discussions, but Zoom will be reserved for last-minute issues or scheduling conflicts. Before starting, each participant will receive a simple verbal explanation of the purpose of the project. All interviews are voluntary, and no names will be published without permission. The goal of these interviews is to learn how staff members share information during emergencies, how each level of

leadership makes decisions, and what difficulties in communication BT faces during stressful events.

BT has provided its current unplanned events procedure, so analyzing this will help support what is learned through interviews. This project will also review the website and social media pages, along with any other alert system, to see how information reaches stakeholders. These materials show what procedures are identified for unplanned events and how the procedures can supplement interviews to ensure all communication is considered, while interviews will show what actually happens during crises and if there are any inconsistencies. If needed, the project may include a few short case examples from other transit systems. These comparisons help identify what words well in other communities and what problems BT might encounter in the future.

There are some ethical considerations to take note of while creating this project. Employees are never required to answer a question, and the recruitment of said employees will be handled in a respectful way. BT will have control over how the final plan is used, and the information gathered will remain focused on strengthening the organization, not being judgmental of its employees. One limitation is that some crises cannot be predicted in advance, so employees may not always recall every detail during an interview. Another limitation involves scheduling since transit employees often work irregular hours. Even with these limitations, however, combining interviews and document analysis of its unplanned events procedure will create a strong foundation for the final crisis communication plan.

Proposed Deliverable, Implementation, and Evaluation Plan

The deliverable will be a complete crisis communication plan for BT. It will be clear and practical, geared towards staff who need fast guidance during unplanned events. The plan will

include crisis response steps, internal and external contact information, sample messages, a list of questions the media might have during a press conference, and evaluation forms.

During January, the project will begin with reviewing documents and scheduling interviews. Interviews will take place during February. In March, the first draft of the crisis communication plan will be written and shared with Blacksburg Transit leadership for feedback. April will include the final revisions and preparation for the committee defense. During the end stages, BT will have the chance to practice using the plan through a short tabletop exercise or guided walk-through. This will help staff become familiar with the plan before a real crisis occurs.

To evaluate the effects of the project, a short before and after assessment will be created for interview participants. Before seeing the plan, participants will be asked about their confidence in BT's ability to respond to a crisis. After reviewing the final plan or participating in a simulated activity, they will be asked the same question. A change in confidence can show the immediate impact of the project. This evaluation does not measure long-term change, but it does show whether the plan creates a clearer structure for employees to follow.

The ultimate goal of this project is to have a completed, detailed, effective crisis communication plan for BT, one that is realistic, organized, and easy for staff to use. In addition, BT should feel more prepared and coordinated when unexpected events occur.

Literature Review

Defining "Crisis" and Its Impacts

In communication scholarship, an organizational crisis is defined as an unpredictable, nonroutine, and high-impact event or series of events that create uncertainty, place intense pressure and scrutiny on an organization's leaders, and can damage public trust and organization-

public relationships (Coombs, 2007; Seeger, 2006). Crises are challenging for organizations because they can threaten the very existence of the organization through components like continuity of operations, credibility, stakeholder confidence, and shareholder trust. Coombs (2007) defined a crisis as a specific and unexpected event that disrupts stakeholders' perceptions of organizational reliability and can generate negative outcomes for the organization. Ulmer and Sellnow (2002), on the other hand, define it as both a danger that can threaten the organization's goals and an opportunity for renewal if the organization improves and learns from the event.

According to Ulmer et al. (2019), there are two crisis types: intentional and unintentional. Intentional crises include terrorism, sabotage, workplace violence, poor employee relationships, poor risk management, hostile takeovers, and unethical leadership. Unintentional crises include natural disasters, disease outbreaks, unforeseeable technical interactions, product failure, and downturns in the economy. Regardless of the crisis type, all crises require coordinated management responses and communication across all relevant publics, both inside and outside an organization (Bachmann et al., 2023; Coombs, 2007). In transportation networks, operational failures can have cascading effects due to system interdependence (von Ferber et al., 2012), which oftentimes spread beyond just a single incident. In their discussion of the effects of crises on the freight transport industry, Borca et al. (2021) argued that natural disasters and economic shocks can be detrimental to supply chains and overall operational functionality. Although their focus was on freight, their findings are relevant to passenger transit, in that disruptions also affect logistics and reputation

Specifically focusing on public transportation, even minor operational failures can escalate quickly because of how much of a direct impact they can make on the public (Pang, 2013; Zhang et al., 2022). Mani and Goniewicz's (2023) analysis of transportation disasters in

Western Asia shows that small weaknesses in the system often grew into major disasters that disrupted entire regions. Their review showed that components like aging infrastructure or poor oversights created conditions for problems to spread faster than agencies could contain them. Despite there even not being any injuries in some cases, many incidents still caused the public to lose its trust in public transportation. The key takeaway from this article is that small failures rarely stay small. When the structure around them is weak, they can ripple outward and become crises that last far longer than the initial event.

Distinguishing Crises from Risks and Issues

It is also important to distinguish crises from related but distinct phenomena such as risks and issues. Seeger (2006) defined risks as potential future events that could cause harm but have not yet occurred. Building on this, Sellnow and Sellnow (2024) explain that risks are defined by potential threat before harm materialized. In other words, a risk signals the possibility of a loss as opposed to its arrival. Jaques (2014), similarly, states that risk is in the pre-crisis space in which organizations still have time to act before the situation escalates. Crises are different in that they are an immediate threat that require rapid decision making. Essentially, both Sellnow and Sellnow (2024) and Jaques (2014) state that risks give organizations a chance to intervene long before a crisis takes shape.

Relatedly, issues are emerging problems or conflicts that have the potential to turn into a crisis. Jaques (2014) states that issues lack clear right answers and often arise from perceived gaps between and organization's behavior and stakeholder expectations. These situations demand attention rather than a straightforward solution. Jaques (2014) states that it is difficult to clearly define what an issue is but can be "categorized as disputation, expectation gap and

impact, and each has its advocates" (p. 3). And because issues are public and value-laden, they require careful resolution. If left unmanaged, they can escalate into a crisis.

Coombs (2007) notes that crises are events that require immediate action, and publics are highly scrutinizing the organization under fire during a crisis. Understanding these distinctions across these concepts matters because each requires a different response, and "[m]iscategorizing can make or break a situation" (Agnes, 2018, p. 87). For instance, in the public transportation industry, a minor service delay might be classified as an issue that requires passenger updates. On the other hand, a systemwide operational failure or accident would escalate to a crisis that demands formal activation of the crisis communication plan.

Crisis Outcomes

Stakeholders interpret not only what happens but also about how organizations communicate about what happens (Mitchell et al., 1997). Coombs (2007) found that a reputation established beforehand can serve as a sort of buffer against public outrage, offering a "halo effect," and transparent and timely communication promotes goodwill. Austin et al. (2012) and Adi (2020) both discuss how the public assesses credibility through responsiveness and empathy, not just information accuracy.

With social media present around the clock, however, user-generated content poses challenges to organizational communication, which creates situations for Cheng's (2020) description of a "social-mediated crisis," a crisis that unfolds primarily on social media. Such scrutinous environments require continuous engagement and monitoring, as misinformation or negative commentary can worsen reputation if ignored (Zhang et al., 2022). After covering crisis outcomes, it is important to understand the crisis lifecycle, discussed by Seeger (2006).

The Crisis Lifecycle

In Seeger's (2006) discussion on best practices in crisis communication, he outlines three phases of crisis communication, which many scholars often use: pre-crisis, crisis response, and post-crisis. And while we identify these three phases, there are sometimes gray areas where it can be hard to clearly tell which phase of the crisis an organization is currently experiencing. However, this is still a widely accepted way to describe the crisis lifecycle in both practice and research.

Pre-Crisis

Organizations in the pre-crisis phase will monitor situations as an attempt to prevent and be ready (prepare) for crises.

Prevention. Seeger (2006) describes this phase as a continuous process of environmental scanning and message planning intended to minimize vulnerability.

Proactive prevention involves identifying potential risks or issues before they worsen. Naveen & Gurtoo (2022) propose a way to prevent public transport issues with operational adjustments such as vehicle sanitation and communication of safety protocols. Both reduce risk and public anxiety.

Preparedness. Despite efforts, crises are not always avoidable. Agnes (2018) outlines a 5-step model for being "crisis ready" that applies to all sectors where PR is present. This model states to first audit mindset and culture. Second, understand variables and impacts. Third, identify scenarios and stakeholders. Fourth, design action plans and communication strategy. Finally, implement skillset and program. By following this model, organizations can better prepare and respond to any crisis they might encounter. This crisis communication plan will take into account all these steps to ensure maximum readiness for any unplanned event.

Further, Massey and Larsen (2006) argue that preparation entails both structure and communicativeness in which there are clear chains of command, trained spokespersons, and simulations conducted to mirror real-world scenarios. In public transportation, such preparation has direct operational parallels: Bachmann et al. (2023) and Gkiotsalitis and Cats (2020) show that planning for capacity limitations and incident redirection is essential for mitigating passenger disruption. Further, Darsena et al. (2023) show the potential of sensing technologies that can help an organization be ready for a crisis.

Barriers To Prevention And Preparedness. However, there are still several barriers that limit crisis readiness, such as resource constraints and leadership complacency or resistance.

Competing stakeholder interests often prevent full implementation, according to Seeger (2006) and Pang (2013). Mitchell et al. (1997) explain that power, legitimacy, and urgency (stakeholder salience) determine which concerns receive organizational attention. Essentially, they suggest that low-power groups such as passengers may be overlooked in early risk assessments. Building trust before a crisis occurs, therefore, through transparency and consistent messaging, can make an organization more credible when messages must be delivered under pressure when the time comes (Austin et al., 2012; Adi, 2020A).

Crisis

Once an event goes beyond preventative control, organizations enter the crisis stage. During this stage, an organization must effectively manage the crisis to mitigate further reputational damage, which involves containing operational damage as well as collecting and analyzing information as the situation is unfolding (Ulmer & Sellnow, 2002). On the other hand, crisis communication focuses on the overall meaning and reconstruction of legitimacy (Ulmer & Sellnow, 2002). Coombs (2007) defines crisis communication as the strategic use of messages to

influence stakeholder perceptions of responsibility and organizational morality. When looking at the transit industry, Pang (2013) found that Singapore's Mass Rapid Transit system's transparent and frequent updates during service breakdowns prevented rumors from starting and maintained a degree of public trust, despite frustration.

Responding to crises is often complicated due to the unique communication issues that arise from pressure. Further, as communication environments change with factors like social media, crises also become more visible. Austin et al. (2012) showed that audience expectations for immediacy and open dialogue during crises have grown amid social media's increased presence. In addition, they also noted that public skepticism and message competition in social media environments make it difficult for organizations to maintain their credibility. Pang (2013) noted that organizations must be both speedy and accurate in their responses during fast-moving events, and Cheng (2020) explained that digital crises amplify emotions, which can cause misinformation and blame to spread faster than official organizational updates. Put together, an effective crisis response requires being clear and empathetic, even when information is incomplete.

Best Practices. There are certain methods that organizations should take to mitigate reputational damage most effectively.

Effective crisis communication begins long before anything goes wrong. Seeger (2006) and Veil et al. (2020) both show that organizations work more confidently during a crisis when they have already prepared beforehand. Good plans push people to notice weak spots early and respond without delay when warning signs appear. These authors also argue that honest and open communication matters more than polished certainty. Since crises rarely have complete informational understanding and require time for information assessment (Veil et al., 2020), they

recommend speaking early, saying what is known, admitting what is unclear, and promising updates as facts develop. Doing this helps the public understand the situation better and lowers the chance that confusion or rumor fills the silence.

An effective response also depends on how organizations treat the people who rely on them, as Seeger (2006) states that leaders must listen closely to concerns and show real concern in return, as communities decide very quickly whether a communicator seems trustworthy. Veil et al. (2020) add that strong relationships with the public and credible partners make messages travel faster and with less resistance. Organizations speaking with empathy and being accessible make their messages clearer and less suspicious. And when the crisis diminishes, plans need another look so teams can learn from what worked and what created more trouble. This constant adjustment keeps communication practices in line with the evolving world of varying stakeholder needs.

Post-Crisis

After the initial threat passes, organizations transition into the post-crisis stage, which involves evaluating the crisis and the lessons learned from it. Ulmer and Sellnow (2002) conceptualize this phase through the discourse of renewal amid a changing world where stakeholders hold the power. They encourage organizations to frame crises as opportunities for ethical reflection and improvement. Discourse of renewal promotes forward-looking transparency and stakeholder empowerment as opposed to relying on just defensive or accommodative tactics (Ulmer & Sellnow, 2002).

Even though the threat may have passed, communication remains vital during the post-crisis stage. Strauli et al. (2022) found that sustained communication about safety reforms and public health measures helped restore passenger trust. In addition, strategies from Image Repair

Theory (IRT) and Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) also carry over into the post-crisis stage. Benoit (2000) discussed how effective apologies and corrective actions can rebuild public goodwill when paired with visible policy changes.

Visual and emotional cues also significantly affect an organization's ability to recover from a crisis. Yook and Stacks (2024) found that social-media posts with authentic visuals like leadership images or content focused on communities improved the perceived sincerity and competence in corporate crisis response. This applies to public organizations trying to humanize bureaucratic communication. Post-crisis learning further involves systematic evaluation and updating of crisis plans (Seeger, 2006). Savoia et al. (2013) state that continuous feedback loops and message testing are essential in light of audiences having diverse perspectives and information needs. Massey and Larsen (2006) also advocate for post-event reviews that identify lessons learned and incorporate them into future training. If done effectively, this step will ensure that each crisis will help organizations be more resilient.

Reputation and stakeholder relationships remain central throughout all three stages. Mitchell et al. (1997) discuss how stakeholders differ in influence and urgency. When organizations recognize these differences, they can prioritize message strategies effectively. In public transportation, stakeholders include passengers, employees, local governments, and the surrounding community. Trust is both a prerequisite and an outcome of crisis communication, according to Austin et al. (2012), and they show that trust acts as a link between perceived competence and information seeking. On the other hand, Strauli et al. (2022) and Zhang et al. (2022) discuss how frequent and consistent messaging during COVID-19 preserved confidence despite ridership declining.

Digital transparency also strengthens relationships. Chang (2020) argues that two-way, real-time, dialogic communication helps maintain organizational authenticity in social media settings. Adi (2020) furthers this idea by showing that responses to passenger feedback signal accountability and empathy. This transparency seen here is an example of Ulmer and Sellnow's (2002) discourse of renewal, which states that open dialogue is the moral foundation of long-term recovery. For BT, adopting these principles could make its online communication a more participatory platform for stakeholder collaboration as opposed to a reactive announcement platform.

Crisis Response Theoretical Frameworks

Coombs (2007) and Seeger (2006) provide managerial and procedural perspectives on crisis communication, respectively, but this field has evolved toward more holistic and ethical interpretations. Coombs (2007), again, views crises through a strategic management lens in which message control and reputation protection are the centerpiece. In contrast, Seeger (2006) discusses a procedural approach in which crisis communication is an ongoing and meaning making one. Ulmer and Sellnow (2002) expand on this by introducing the discourse of renewal: crises are not solely negative disruptions but moments for ethical growth and organizational self-reflection. Going from defensive to dialogic communication shows how crisis communication today focuses more on image management balanced with public accountability.

Benoit's (2000) claim that crises inherently involve reputational threat shows the need for a more systematic and theory-based communication approach to crisis planning and response. Several theories explain how organizations should communicate during the crisis stage, including image repair theory, situational crisis communication theory, stealing thunder, and theories of social media and crisis response

Image Repair Theory

Benoit's (1997) Image Repair Theory (IRT) lays out options to display accountability and remorse for wrongdoings. Benoit introduced this theory because organizations rarely benefit from silence amid facing public criticism. Benoit argues that organizations must respond using predictable rhetorical patterns that audiences intuitively recognize, also arguing that image threats occur when an organization is believed to be responsible for an act that relevant audiences consider offense. And because perception often outweighs reality, organizations need a better, more structured way to repair that damage. IRT was created to provide that structure by providing the full range of message choices an organization can make during a crisis. Benoit has five categories of message response: denial of fault, evasion of responsibility, reducing offensiveness, corrective action, and mortification. Together, these map how organizations should respond based on the situation they are in.

These strategies, as mentioned, vary based on situation type. First, denial can involve either the outright rejection of involvement or shifting blame elsewhere. Evasion of responsibility includes claims of doing something on accident or having good intentions. Next, reducing offensiveness bolsters past good behavior to mitigate outrage. Corrective action, meanwhile, commits to fixing the problem or preventing its return. Finally, mortification involves full confession and apology.

IRT has been seen used in the transportation industry, as shown by Cooper's (2015) discussion of the mass vehicle recall that occurred with Toyota. Its response entailed a combination of denial, corrective action, compensation, and apologies to ensure minimal reputational damage resulting from accelerator-related safety failures. Overall, it is crucial that Blacksburg Transit (BT) produce the correct messaging in any crisis it may experience, and by

knowing these strategies with a comprehensive crisis communication plan, it will be better equipped to respond appropriately.

Situational Crisis Communication Theory

Coombs's (2007) Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) links crisis type and perceived responsibility to recommended strategies. These strategies are denial, diminish, and rebuild. Denial should occur when the organization itself is the victim. Diminish should occur when an accident occurs. And rebuild should be reserved for preventable crises. SCCT helps communicators use these strategies based on the type of crisis in order to protect reputation (Coombs, 2007).

Stealing Thunder

Whereas IRT and SCCT focus on specific response strategies, Lee (2016) introduced the concept of stealing thunder, a timing-based theory that proposes organizations should self-disclose negative information before external exposure reduces perceived responsibility and enhance credibility. By self-disclosing negative information, the public will view the organization as more transparent, thereby mitigating further reputational damage. Each of these theories show that transparency and timeliness are essential for BT.

Theories of Social Media and Crisis Response

Digital communication is crucial when communicating with publics. Austin et al. (2012) and Cheng (2020) confirm this claim by showing that publics and organizations co-create crises, as captured in the Social Mediated Crisis Communication (SMCC) model, which shows how social media and traditional media operate together during a crisis. Adi (2020) adds to this by observing how commuters during a train delay relied on social networks for both updates and emotional validation. Adi found that people tended to perceive their peers as more trustworthy

than official channels. These findings suggest that communication from the organization to the public is no longer straightforward. Rather, it circulates through interconnected users who interpret influence communication. For the transit industry, this means that online complaints, what Coombs and Holladay (2012) call "paracrises," must have someone monitoring and addressing them in a timely manner to prevent escalation.

For context, a paracrisis differs from a regular crisis because it is a public threat as opposed to a full-blown emergency. Coombs & Holladay (2012) explain that a paracrisis happens earlier in the crisis cycle, when stakeholders publicly accuse an organization of unethical or irresponsible behavior. During this time, people are watching how an organization will respond, and because these situations can escalate quickly if mishandles, Coombs and Holladay give three strategic response options: refute (defend behavior), reform (changing practices), or refuse (allow the issue to fade). Choosing the right strategy is critical amid intense public scrutiny.

Implications for Blacksburg Transit

The implications of this existing pool of crisis models have several implications for BT. First, integrating SCCT (Coombs, 2007) and IRT (Benoit, 2000) into agency policy would ensure that message framing is aligned with responsibility attribution. When mechanical failures or service disruptions occur, those responsible for communication could use diminish or rebuild strategies depending on the perceived fault. Second, pre-crisis readiness must be put into practice with simulations. Using Massey and Larsen's (2006) and Seeger's (2006) research, BT could establish annual crisis drills with necessary staff. Using the stealing thunder strategy (Lee, 2016) in these protocols would encourage timely disclosure, enhancing transparency. Moreover, technologies from Darsena et al. (2023) and operational methods from Bachmann et al. (2023)

could help BT with communicating data-driven messages and rapid information dissemination for crowd management during incidents.

During active crises, BT should leverage social media as an engagement and listening tool rather than just a platform to post announcements. Adi (2020), Cheng (2020), and Zhang et al. (2022) all show that publics use social networks to engage in two-way dialogue pertaining to the organization. If BT posts frequent updates and responds to user questions in real time, its accountability will improve. Finally, in post-crisis recovery, BT can apply the discourse of renewal (Ulmer & Sellnow, 2002) by maintaining community partnerships and continuous improvement. Visual storytelling (Yook & Stacks, 2024) and transparency about corrective actions can further humanize communication, which can help rebuild trust with passengers and the public.

Scholarship across these chosen pieces of literature collectively shows that communication is an iterative process. Organizations must be prepared for all situations and be responsive to the public. The pre-crisis stage requires strategy, including drafting crisis plans and conducting simulations. The crisis stage requires evidence-based messaging strategies that match who is perceived as responsible for the event. And finally, the post-crisis stage centers on transparency and community engagement where the organization learns from the event. Adopting these principles can help BT prevent crises from occurring and ensure they are prepared if a crisis does occur, as this organization's reputation relies on operational reliability and public confidence. Instead, they can be opportunities for resilience and trust building.

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AI Statement

ChatGPT was used to research sources for both the Organizational Background and Literature Review sections of this proposal. In addition, I used it to partially help me with the format of the interview consent form. Finally, ChatGPT was used to create questions for interviews and surveys based on the information I provided it. I accept full responsibility for the content produced by AI.

Appendix A

Interview Consent Form

Project Title: Proactive Protection: A Proposal to Create a Comprehensive Crisis Communication Plan for Blacksburg Transit

Interviewer: Caleb Land | calebtl@vt.edu

School of Communication

Reputation Management Master's Program

Virginia Tech

Faculty Advisor: Dr. John Tedesco | tedesco@vt.edu

Purpose of the Interviews

The purpose of this interview is to learn about the communication within BT during unplanned events. You will be asked a series of questions on how decisions are made and what communication challenges, if any, staff experience. Findings will be used solely for the creation of the final crisis communication plan and for the academic completion of this project.

Interview Date:_____ **Approximate Duration:**_____

Location:_____

This form documents your permission for Caleb Land to interview you for the purposes of understanding the decision-making and communication challenges BT faces amid an unplanned event.

1. I, _____, agree to participate in the interview and consent to being recorded during the interview as outlined below: (check all that apply)

☐ Notetaking. I consent to having notes taken of my responses during the interview.

☐ Audio Recordings. I consent to being audio recorded during the interview.

2. I understand that I may withdraw my consent at any time without penalty by giving written notice to the interviewer. If I decide to withdraw, I understand that I can request the removal of my interview materials from any future publications, although it may not be possible to remove content that has already been published.
3. I understand that the interviewer may identify me by name in any interview materials used.
4. I have been told how the interview information and audio recordings will be used and the purpose of the interview.
5. I understand that I will not receive any benefit or payment for my participation.

By signing below, I confirm my understanding of the above information and release the interviewer from liability from any claims, costs, expenses, and damages that might result from the interview information and/or audio recordings being used.

Participant Signature: _____ Date: _____

Print Name:_____

Source: https://esign.com/consent/interview/

Appendix B

Interview Protocols

The purpose of these interviews is to learn what current knowledge BT employees have about the current procedures in place amid a crisis. Insights from these interviews will aid with the development of the final crisis communication plan and strengthen BT's overall preparedness.

Interviews will be semi-structured with a consistent set of core questions across participants while leaving room for follow-up questions that might arise from respondents' answers. Interviews are expected to last 15-30 minutes. In-person interviews (in a quiet and private area) will be favored due to more natural discussions, but Zoom will be reserved for last-minute issues or scheduling conflicts. The interview will begin with greeting the participant, stating the purpose of the project, confirming voluntary participation, and confirming permission for notetaking and/or audio recording. The participants will then be asked introductory and background questions, and then, they will be asked core questions related to communication and decision-making. In the process, participants might be asked follow-up questions as needed for clarity. The participants will then be asked if there are any questions for the interviewer as well as anything to be added not covered. The interview will then close, participants being thanked for their time.

Interview Questions

Although the questions may be adapted based on the role of the participant, the core interview questions are as follows:

1. Can you briefly describe your role at BT and how long you have worked here?
2. What does your typical day look like here?

3. Have you ever experienced an unplanned event or emergency while working at BT?
    a. If yes, can you walk me through what happened from your perspective?
    b. What communication challenges, if any, did you encounter during that event?
4. When something unexpected happens, how does information typically move through the organization?
5. Who is usually the first person or department to be notified?
6. How is information relayed between operators and leadership?
7. Are there times when communication flows smoothly?
    a. What makes it work well?
8. Are there times when communication breaks down or becomes confusing?
    a. What contributes to that?
9. When a service disruption occurs, who usually makes decisions about what to do next?
    a. How are those decisions communicated to the rest of the team?
10. Do you feel that the current decision-making process is clear during emergencies? Why or why not?
11. What communication tools do you rely on most during an unplanned event?
    a. Do these tools ever fail?
12. Do you feel that communication with riders happens quickly enough? Why or why not?
13. What feedback have you seen or heard from riders during service disruptions?
14. How well do you feel BT is prepared for handling unplanned events?
15. Have you received any training on crisis communication or emergency procedures?
16. Do different departments coordinate well during emergencies? Why or why not?
17. What are the biggest communication challenges during unplanned events?

18. If you could fix one part of the communication process during emergencies, what would it be?
19. What policies, if any, would make your job easier during a crisis?
20. What does BT currently do well during service disruptions or emergencies?
21. What would you like to see included in a future crisis communication plan?
22. How do you think BT could improve communication with riders during disruptions?
23. Is there anything else you think I should know about communication here that could help in creating the crisis plan?

Recording and Notetaking Procedures

Participants may consent to notetaking, audio recording, or both. All materials will be stored securely on a password-protected device belonging to the interviewer. No identifying information will be included in the final project unless a participant explicitly grants permission.

Ethical Guidelines

Participation is entirely voluntary, and employees do not have to answer any question they are not comfortable answering: no explanation is needed.

The interviews exist to strictly understand organizational procedures to help BT improve on its communication and decision-making. They will not evaluate individual performance. The interviews will follow the same procedures and structure to ensure fairness and consistency across participants.

Appendix C

Sample Crisis Plan Outline

Cover Page

A Crisis Communication Plan

Blacksburg Transit

Table of Contents

Introduction

- Importance of a crisis communication plan
- Reiterate BT's mission (safety, reliability, accessibility, courtesy, environmental commitment)
- Increasing expectations in a social-mediated environment
- Summary of potential crises in public transit

Acknowledgements

- Signatures of BT leadership acknowledging the plan
    - Transit Director
    - Administrative Specialist
    - Operations Manager
    - Finance Manager
    - Maintenance Manager
    - Interim Communications & Customer Support Manager
    - ITS Manager
    - Human Resources Manager
    - EEO Officer

  - DAPM / DER
  - Title VI Coordinator
  - DBE Liaison Officer

Rehearsal and Training Schedule

- Frequency of plan testing
- Documentation of past rehearsal dates
- Requirements for staff participation
- Objectives of each drill

Purpose and Objectives

- To provide a more structured, proactive plan to prevent and respond to crises

Key Publics

- Virginia Tech
- Town of Blacksburg
- Town of Christiansburg
- NRVMPO
- Riders and local community

Notifying Publics

- Who must be informed first
- Method of communication
- Responsible party for each

Crisis Inventory

- Categorize crisis types based on likelihood and threat, including high, moderate, and low risk

Crisis Communication Team

- Who is responsible for what amid a crisis

Crisis Directory

- Leadership contact info
- Managers
- Operational contacts
- VT emergency and communication contacts
- Town of Blacksburg contacts

Media Spokesperson

- Identify designated spokespersons
    - Provide list of trick questions the media might have to properly prepare spokesperson

Emergency Personnel Directory

- Blacksburg/VT Police
- Montgomery County Sheriff
- Blacksburg Volunteer Fire Department

Key Media Outlets

- Local newspapers
- TV and radio
- VT student media
- Social media platforms

Crisis Control Center

- Primary location (BT Admin building)

Equipment and Supplies

- Materials needed for crisis management and communication between relevant personnel

Pre-Gathered Information

- BT mission statement and goals
- Service area maps
- Route descriptions
- Crisis talking points
- Press releases (samples, templates)
- Fact sheets
- Leadership biographies

Talking Points

- Safety as top priority
- Transparency and timeliness
- Minimizing disruptions
- Empathy toward affected riders
- Commitment to corrective action
- Future-facing renewal

Owned and Shared Media

Prodromes

- List early warning signs a crisis is forming

Resources/Links

- BT website and app
- Town of Blacksburg resources

- VT emergency resources
- NRVMPO
- Federal Transit Administration emergency management guidelines

Evaluation Forms

- Qualitative and quantitative evaluation, including open-ended questions and Likert scales measuring overall effectiveness of crisis management

References

Appendix D

Evaluation Protocols

BT's knowledge of managing crises will be evaluated before and after it receives the crisis communication plan. These evaluations will ensure that BT's communication readiness improves over time, that employees feel more confident in responding to unplanned events, and that revisions to the plan are grounded in real feedback. This evaluation does not measure long-term organizational change; rather, it evaluates the immediate changes in confidence before and after BT adopts this plan. The overarching goal of this evaluation is to assess the degree to which BT's crisis communication plan increases confidence in crisis response, understanding of communication procedures, clarity of roles, and perceived preparedness when facing unplanned events.

The evaluation consists of a pre-implementation employee confidence survey and a post-implementation confidence survey, both of which will be distributed on a Google Form. The pre-implementation survey will be completed before the crisis plan is distributed and exists to establish a baseline measure of confidence and understanding. The post-implementation survey will be completed after employees have reviewed the plan or participated in a training session. It will measure how much the plan improved clarity and confidence. Both surveys will be anonymous to encourage honest feedback.

Pre-Implementation Employee Confidence Survey

For each statement, please indicate the extent to which you agree.

1 = Strongly Disagree

2 = Disagree

3 = Neutral

4 = Agree

5 = Strongly Agree

1. I feel confident responding to unplanned events in my current role.
2. I feel prepared to make quick decisions during a service disruption or emergency.
3. I feel comfortable communicating with supervisors or other departments during an unexpected event.
4. I understand who I should notify first if an emergency occurs.
5. I understand the general flow of communication between departments during disruptions.
6. I know what steps I am expected to take when an unplanned event occurs.
7. I know where to find information or guidance when a crisis happens.

Open-Ended Questions

1. What makes responding to unplanned events difficult in your role?
2. What information or tools would increase your confidence during emergencies?

Post-Implementation Employee Confidence Survey

For each statement, please indicate the extent to which you agree.

1 = Strongly Disagree

2 = Disagree

3 = Neutral

4 = Agree

5 = = Strongly Agree

1. After reviewing the crisis communication plan, I feel more confident responding to unplanned events in my current role.
2. I feel more prepared to make decisions during a service disruption or emergency.

3. The plan helps me feel more comfortable communicating with supervisors or other departments during crises.
4. The crisis communication plan clearly explains who I should notify first in an emergency.
5. I now better understand how communication should flow between departments during disruptions.
6. The plan clearly outlines the steps I should take during an unplanned event.
7. I know where to find crisis-related information or instructions when needed.

Open-Ended Questions

1. What part of the crisis communication plan improved your confidence the most?
2. What areas of the plan feel unclear or need improvement?