

Communicating in a Crisis: A Case Study of the BP Oil Spill

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Introduction

This paper discusses the application of key crisis communications principles by reviewing messages delivered during the BP Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill that began in April 2010. This particular case study was chosen for a variety of reasons, not the least of which is the substantial amount of media coverage of numerous communication events from which to analyze the messages and activities of the various organizational and governmental representatives.

Case studies are valuable tools for the study of risk and crisis communications as they allow organizations not impacted by a particular event to clearly view the tremendous problems associated with delivering messages in the current media culture that provides constant access to a variety of images and reports. Crisis management in the current environment places many organizations in a seemingly impossible position as it attempts to both accept responsibly and limit liability, as key management listens in one ear to in-house or external media relations specialists and in the other to legal counsel, as members of the organization work to both deal with the immediate needs of the crisis and simultaneously try to find answers to what happened. And all of these events occur under the relentless and hypercritical eye of the current media culture which requires constant access to key organizational spokespersons for extended periods of time and is quick to pounce on even the smallest error by an exhausted spokesperson who may be dealing with the crisis sixteen to eighteen hour days for weeks or months on end.

While it would seem that an organization faces an uphill battle just to stay afloat, the lessons learned by applying basic principles of risk and crisis communications provide much for other organizations to use in the future if they end up in the unfortunate position recently experienced by BP and several of its prime subcontractors including Halliburton, Transocean and Cameron.

This crisis dominated the front pages of major newspapers and became the lead story on news broadcasts for months beginning with the explosion, fire and eventual sinking of the Deepwater Horizon Oil rig on the night of April 20, 2010. As this paper is being written, the oil leak has been stopped for several months, after spewing somewhere in the neighborhood of 140 million gallons of oil into the Gulf of Mexico, and while clean-up activities are still occurring and will for some time to come, daily coverage of the event no longer appears in most major media outlets. The total amount of oil spilled remains disputed for reasons that are further explained below, however, even using the lower of the estimates, the spill quickly overshadowed the size of the Exxon Valdez oil spill in 1989 which leaked a mere 11 million gallons, although it was

nowhere near the largest oil spill on record – 460 million gallons that were deliberately released by the Iraqi forces during the Persian Gulf War in 1991.

It should also be noted that each major oil spill from the last twenty-five years is unique in several key characteristics. The Valdez spill was an above-water spill from a grounded tanker. The total potential volume of oil that could spill was never in question and the area impacted by the spill remained fairly small and isolated. But as it was the first major oil spill to be so comprehensively covered by the media, it is easily recalled by many members of the general public, usually by simply using the name of the tanker. The basic details about what happened are also fairly simple – a tanker ran aground in a known hazardous area (Bligh Reef) causing a gash in the side of the tanker from which the oil spilled. The Persian Gulf Oil spill was deliberately caused by Iraqi forces (the “enemy”), the damage was contained to an area that the vast majority of Americans would never have visited, and coverage was limited to war footage showing the blazing oil rigs and fires that burned long after the war ended.

The BP Deepwater Spill was an underground spill from a nearly completely drilled oil well that had yet to go into production. The technical nature of what happened introduced a new set of words and phrases into the vocabulary of most audience members, including “blow-out preventer”, “drilling mud”, “low marine riser package”, “top kill” and “junk kill”. It also occurred nearly 5,000 miles underwater and was visible only after images from the underwater video camera were made public.

Due to the long-standing nature of this crisis and the sheer number of communication events available for analysis, the focus of this case study is being limited to the first three months following the initial explosion, beginning with the initial communication events discussing the technical terms and the immediate steps being taken to deal with the spill until the announcement of the reassignment of Tony Heyward, the Chief Executive of BP, plc and the main spokesperson for BP in the early stages of the crisis.

Profiling the Audience - Risk Perception

How seriously the audience views a crisis or risk is dependent upon how they view a number of key factors. Vincent Covello and his colleagues at the Center for Risk Communication have developed a theoretical model of fifteen key factors vital in understanding how an audience in a crisis perceives the events that are being explained to them through various messages and communication events. The following table identifies those key factors and provides a brief analysis of how audience members, typically the public, would perceive this crisis.

Table 1

Risk Factor	Applicability	Applicability to BP Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill
Voluntariness	If the audience perceives the risk to be voluntary, they are more likely to accept it because they understand	Audience members would have limited perception that this risk is voluntary as drilling for oil underwater is not necessary except to provide for

	their role in experiencing the implications of the risk.	the amount of oil most audience members voluntarily consume. For many years, there have been public discussions about the need to reduce the amount of oil consumed, although most of those discussions have been framed in the reduction of the reliance of foreign oil, leaving some audience members to perhaps accept this crisis as a necessary part of drilling for self-produced oil.
Controllability	If the audience perceives that they have control over the risk, they are more likely to accept the implications of it.	Audience members would have had no role to play in determining whether or not this crisis occurred, leading to low acceptance of the event.
Familiarity	If the audience has some previous knowledge of the risk or experience with it, they are more likely to accept the implications of it because of the increased level of knowing what might or might not happen.	As was noted above, the technical nature of underwater drilling was not familiar to most audience members, many of whom appear to have been unaware of how much oil could possibly spill with a catastrophic failure of an oil rig such as Deepwater Horizon.
Equity	If the audience perceives the implications and consequences of the risk to be equally shared among audience members, they are more likely to accept the implications of it.	Most audience members would likely understand that the immediate day-to-day life implications are equally shared except for those whose livelihoods are dependent upon the industries in the gulf (fishing, oil production and tourism). The recent devastation caused by Hurricane Katrina in the same area might lead some audience members to have a sense of unfairness for those that live in the area.
		In some respects, as noted above, audience members might understand that the risks of offshore drilling have some

Benefits	If an audience perceives the ultimate benefits of the risk to be positive, they are more likely to accept the potential negative implications of experiencing it.	negative implications. Their perception of just how risky the drilling might be was probably nowhere near the level of the final outcome of this crisis. The audience might have been more willing to accept the implications of a smaller spill that was readily contained, but it is difficult for the audience to accept the types of negative implications of this spill.
Understanding	If an audience possesses a basic understanding of the risk, they are more likely to accept the implications of it. The greater the level of understanding, the higher the acceptance.	Deepwater oil drilling was debated for many years and was somewhat of a public controversy, although not widespread, particularly in areas where drilling is not a major industry. The oil companies were able to secure drilling permits by convincing the governmental authorities that the risk of a major spill was very low and that if it occurred the companies were prepared to deal with it. While subgroups of the audience may have remained skeptical and in major opposition of deepwater drilling, most of the audience went about their daily lives until the current crisis. Now the oil companies are finding it hard to answer the questions about how it could have happened and why were they not better prepared to deal with a major spill.
Uncertainty	If an audience perception is that the risks have a degree of certainty in various dimensions and in the scientific information available	It is not likely that most of the members of the audience ever spent a significant amount of time fully analyzing the risk assessment information made available during the debates about deepwater oil drilling; therefore, their analysis of the information and the certainty

	about it, they are more likely to accept the implications of it.	of it was probably limited as well. They most likely accepted the views of other organizations with whom they identified (i.e. environmental groups in opposition and oil industry groups in support)
Dread	If an audience's emotions with regards to a risk are less intense and fearful, they more likely they are to accept the implications of it.	Most audience members do not dread an underwater oil spill and would accept the possibility of its occurring without fear of how it might impact their daily life. They might be less accepting now, however, as they have seen the impact of a spill of this magnitude.
Trust in Institutions	If an audience perceives the institutions more significantly involved in the risk as trustworthy and credible, the more likely they are to accept the implications of it.	As corporations, major oil companies probably do not have a significantly high level of trustworthiness. The seemingly random fluctuations in the prices of gasoline are often covered by the media and feature a frustrated audience that voices a belief that corporations continue to make a substantial profit at their expense.
Reversibility	If an audience perceives the risk to have reversible adverse effects, they are more likely to accept the implications of it.	An oil spill of this magnitude has essentially no reversibility and much of the coverage has focused on the unknown (and unknowable) length of time it will take before the gulf returns to pre-spill conditions. Most audience members are likely to have good understandings of the irreversibility of this crisis.
Personal Stake	If an audience perceives the risk to be limited in its personal implications and consequences, the more likely they are to accept the implications of the risk.	As noted above, the vast majority of the audience is not directly affected by the spill, even if their sympathy for the audience members living in the area and the environmental damage being caused by it is high.

Ethical/Moral Nature	If an audience perceives the risk to be morally or ethically acceptable, they are more likely to accept the implications of it.	The perceived lack of ethics among major corporations is not the issue in this factor. Most audience members would not have a strong position either way regarding the ethics or morality of the risk of deepwater oil drilling, except for their consideration of the lives lost the night of the explosion and the risk to fellow audience members who work in the industry.
Human vs. Natural Origin	If an audience perceives that the origin of the risk is naturally occurring, they are more likely to accept the implications of it.	The origin of this risk is completely human and based upon a decision made by humans to take on the risk. However, since many audience members may not have been deeply involved in the controversy surrounding whether or not to drill offshore they were likely to accept the risk before it occurred, though probably not now.
Catastrophic Potential	If the audience perceives that the amount of fatalities, injuries and illness from a risk are minimal, they are more likely to accept the implications of it.	Oil rig explosions are relatively rare events and the consequences of ones that have occurred fairly recently have not been nearly as serious as Deepwater Horizon. The risk now perceived by the audience has been elevated.

The applicability of Covello’s Risk Perception Factors to BP Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill (Covello 2001)

As Table #1 demonstrates, the audience’s perception of the overall risk of deepwater drilling and the potential for a spill of such magnitude would in general be fairly low. Their fear or dread of such a spill would also be fairly low, unless they were identified with some group that made opposition to deepwater drilling a key issue. Audience members would also be fairly unfamiliar with the technical nature of the risk and the eventual outcome if the hazard occurred and would be far enough removed from the immediate implications of the risk as to be less disturbed by it. However, the audience’s perception of the above factors created a situation where the audience was fairly unprepared for a significant oil spill and, when graphically and daily confronted with it through the media, their response, as expected, was strongly negative, regardless of whether or not it had any direct impact on their daily lives. In addition, given the length of time it took for the initial oil spill to be stopped and the years it will likely take to return

the area to pre-spill conditions, it is fairly easy to foresee an audience that was primed to be angry at the outset of the spill and possess significant levels of mistrust of the organizational and governmental spokespersons. It is also fairly easy to predict that a few mistaken comments or failed procedures would significantly raise the negative emotional levels of the audience members.

Understanding the Technical Nature of the Spill

In the early hours of the event, it was enough to simply tell the audience that there had been an explosion and fire aboard the oil rig, resulting in the deaths of 11 of the slightly more than 100 workers on the rig, that the ensuing fire eventually caused the rig to collapse, and that the explosion caused the underwater pipeline at the bottom of the sea floor to leak sending oil to the surface of the water. As the hours turned into days and then became weeks and months, the level of technicality of the communication events needed to be increased to include information about the process of underwater drilling and the methods being attempted to cap the flow of oil and clean up the resulting mess left behind. In order to develop this type of groundwork in the initial communication events, the use of a set of consistent terms and phrases that described what was occurring was crucial. (U.S. DHHS 2006) This technique appeared to achieve some measure of success as the terms “blow out preventer”, “top kill” and “relief wells” were explained repeatedly by management representatives of BP and other companies involved in work on the drilling rig as they described their actions to try and stop the leak.

“The Cameron product used by the Deepwater Horizon is called a ‘blowout preventer’ or ‘BOP’, a product that Cameron actually invented in the 1920’s that allows our customers to control the pressure in a well while being drilled.” (US House of Representatives Subcommittee on Oversight & Investigation Testimony, Jack B. Moore; 12 May, 2010)

“A BOP (blowout preventer) is a large piece of equipment positioned at the top of the wellhead to provide pressure control. BOPs are designed to quickly shut off the flow of oil or natural gas by squeezing, crushing or shearing the pipe in the event of a ‘kick’ or ‘blowout’ – a sudden, unexpected release of pressure from within the well that can occur during drilling.” (US House of Representatives Subcommittee on Oversight & Investigation Testimony, Steve Newman; 12 May, 2010)

“Our first priority is to stop the flow of oil and secure the well. In order to do that, we are using multiple deepwater drilling units, numerous support vessels, and Remotely Operated Vehicles (ROVs), working on several concurrent strategies...Our primary focus over the last week has been on what is known in the industry as a ‘top kill’. It is a technique for capping wells which has been used worldwide. The technique will inject heavy drilling mud into the blowout preventer (BOP) and well bore in an attempt to kill the well. If necessary we are also preparing a ‘junk shot’ technique to clog the BOP and stop the flow. This involves the injection of fibrous material into the BOP.” (US House of Representatives Committee on Natural Resources Testimony; Lamar McKay; 27 May, 2010)

And within in a brief period of time, the terms became part of everyday language as evidenced by the following headlines:

- “‘Top kill’ fails to stop flow of oil, BP says” (CNN 2010)
- “‘Top kill’ fails to plug leak; BP readies next approach” – (Krauss, Kaufman 2010)
- “Americans wait to learn if top kill will stop oil” - (Nuckols, Bluestein 2010)

Trust and Credibility

Trust and credibility of both the organization and the communicator are fundamental factors that determine the success or failure of crisis communications. An organization that has built trust and credibility with its audience members is much more likely to successfully navigate a crisis, even if it has some responsibility for the events and the results that impact the daily lives of the audience members. In addition, once lost, trust and credibility are difficult to regain and audience members are more likely to accept negative messages about the organization from other sources, even if the messages appear untrue or unrealistic. A landmark study by Peters, Covello and McCallum in 1997 (Peters, et. al 1997) questioned whether or not it could be determined *what* increases the audience’s level of trust and credibility of the organization, enabling messages and activities to be more specifically targeted towards those goals. Two key findings apply to this case study; the second appears later in this section.

1. In the *industrial sector*, an increase in the audience’s *perceptions of concern and care* provides for the largest increase in trust and credibility by the audience of the organization. A common stereotype of many industries is the perception that the organization is more concerned about profits rather than people. Therefore an industrial organization that can use risk communication events to develop or increase the audience’s level of perception that the organization also cares about what happens in the community is likely to be more successful.

The implications for BP are that the ability to demonstrate a concern for people over profits and the ability to communicate a certain level of care regarding the implications of the oil spill would increase the levels of trust and credibility on the part of the audience. An analysis of the messages from BP and their actions reveal two key aspects of this concept. The first section below reviews various messages from key BP executives and the level of concern and care they communicated. The second section considers the difficulties BP encountered in attempting to stop the oil spill and the length of time it eventually took to succeed. This time lapse ultimately worked against BP; additional discussion about this appears further below in the section about how much oil was being spilled (Worst Case Scenario – How Much Oil?).

While testifying before the House Committee on Natural Resources on May 27, 2010, Chairman and President of BP America, Lamar McKay said:

“We have all experienced a tragic series of events. I want to be clear from the outset that we will not rest until the well is under control....This was a horrendous accident. We are all devastated by this. It has profoundly touched our employees, their families, our partners, customers, those in the surrounding areas and those in government with whom we are working. There has been tremendous shock that such an accident could have happened, and great sorrow for the lives lost and the injuries sustained. “(US House of Representatives Committee on Natural Resources Testimony; Lamar McKay; 27 May, 2010)

And as part of his testimony before the House Committee on Energy and Commerce on June 17, 2010, BP's Chief Executive Tony Hayward said:

"The explosion and fire aboard the Deepwater Horizon and the resulting oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico never should have happened – and I am deeply sorry that they did. This is a tragedy: People lost their lives; others were injured; and the Gulf Coast environment and communities are suffering. This is unacceptable, I understand that, and let me be very clear; I fully grasp the terrible reality of the situation. I know that this incident has profoundly impacted lives and caused turmoil, and I deeply regret that. "Let me be clear: BP has accepted this responsibility and will fulfill this obligation. We have spent nearly \$1.5 billion so far, and we will not stop until the job is done." (US House of Representatives Committee on Energy and Commerce Testimony; Tony Hayward; 17 June, 2010)

But was it enough to decrease the level of mistrust by the public already in place as discussed above? In the same testimony, Lamar McKay acknowledged those perceptions by saying:

"But I hear the concerns, fears, frustrations – and anger – being voiced all across the country. I understand it, and I know that these sentiments will continue until the leak is stopped and until we prove through our actions that we will do the right thing. Our actions will mean more than words, and we know that, in the end, we will be judged by the quality of our response. Until this happens, no words can be satisfying."

However, further analysis of the messages delivered by key BP executives frequently led to an uncomfortable combination of both accepting responsibility and, at the same time and *in the same message* suggesting that the incident was not the fault of BP and that they were merely *victims of an unpreventable accident* as well as only one of many companies who shared some of the blame. From the same testimonies of Hayward and McKay came the following messages:

"The investigation team's work thus far suggests that this accident was brought about by the apparent failure of a number of processes, systems, and equipment. While the team's work is not done, it appears that there were multiple control mechanisms – procedures and equipment – in place that should have prevented this accident or reduced the impact of the spill...The truth however, is that this is a complex accident, caused by an *unprecedented combination of failures*. *A number of companies are involved.*" – Tony Hayward (author italics)

"But the investigation team's work so far suggests that this is a complex accident involving the *failure of a number of processes, systems, and equipment*. There were multiple control mechanisms – procedures and equipment – in place that should have prevented this accident or reduced the impact of the spill. Put simply, there seems to have been an *unprecedented combination of failures.*" - Lamar McKay (author italics)

BP appears to have done a good job at communicating its genuine sorrow for what happened; their words attempt to convey their understanding of just how awful the incident is. But the problem is that everyone feels bad about what happened. Rare would be the person who could consider the ramifications of an incident where eleven people lost their lives, thousands lost their livelihoods, and hundreds of thousands lost their way of life along with the ability to enjoy their homes and communities for a long period of time and not have some compassion. What BP failed to do in their messages was take their expressions of sadness about what happened and

their willingness to make it right and combine that with a message that also accepted some blame for what happened, instead of attempting to say that both the organization was only one of many victims and that some of the other complainers involved in the drilling operations were at fault too. The latter may very well be the case, but BP was seen as the leading company as evidenced by their role as operator of the rig. Other companies that were involved in the incident were subcontractor to BP and regardless of the role the other organizations played in the decisions that were made in the lead-up to the explosion, BP had the final say.

In his analysis of BP's crisis communication efforts, Peter Sandman, a well-known expert in the field of crisis communications said:

“But apologies require more than regret. They require acceptance of responsibility. The Committee (during his testimony) kept pressing Hayward to concede that BP had contributed to the disaster by cutting corners and ignoring red flags. Or, indeed, that BP had done anything wrong, anything that contributed to the disaster, anything at all. He wouldn't go there, insisting that we should all await the conclusions of the many ongoing investigations rather than speculating on what went wrong. That may be good litigation strategy, but it isn't good risk communications.” (Sandman September 2010)

In addition to the problems associated with the above messages, an unfortunate misuse of a word led to the back-firing of a well-intentioned message when BP Chairman Carl-Henric Svanberg, late in the crisis said the following after a meeting with President Obama on June 15 2010 where he pledged \$20 billion in funds to be available to compensate victims of the oil spill:

"I hear comments sometimes that large oil companies are greedy companies or don't care, but that is not the case with BP. We care about the small people." (Mohr 2010)

For some members of the audience, his clumsy use of the term “small” was an understandable translation error and he quickly attempted to correct it.

“What I was trying to say – that BP understands how deeply this affects the lives of the people who live along the gulf and depend on it for their livelihood – will best be conveyed not by any words but by the work we do to put things right for the families and businesses who've been hurt.” (Mohr 2010)

While both remarks were an attempt by BP to demonstrate that it did understand the frustration that the “average” American would feel coming up against a giant multi-national corporation and was an obvious attempt by BP to put a human spin on its understanding of the situation, it fell short due to the poor choice of words as well as the unique point in the crisis when the message was delivered. By June 16, 2010, the crisis was nearly two months old and most of the audience was weary with failed attempts to stop the flow of oil.

2. In the *government sector*, an increase in audience's *perceptions of commitment* provides for the largest increase in trust and credibility. The common stereotype about governmental organizations is that they lack stability; the political party in power determines the goals and efforts of the organization, which may not always be what is best for the audience. And when election results change those in control of the organization, the commitment to previous causes or efforts may be moved to a much lesser level of priority or even completely ignored. The notion that most politicians are looking out for themselves and their ongoing electability is one that

can be seen in voter polls and letters to the editors, among other similar venues. Crafting messages that overcoming this perception among the audience and demonstrating a sincere ability to commit to an effort or project over the long haul are likely to generate the largest change in audience perceptions of trust and credibility.

One of the key tasks then for the Obama Administration was to overcome the audience's assumption that the government would not be able to sustain its role in dealing with the oil spill over the long haul and that in time, their commitment to the clean-up and to holding BP and other organizations responsible, would flounder or end. As this text is being written it is too soon to ascertain whether or not this has come to fruition, however, several message examples demonstrate a fairly tightly controlled message on the part of governmental spokespersons in the early days. It would appear that the Obama Administration did a good job at keeping its message consistent.

From President Obama:

"I'm here to tell you that you are not alone, you will not be abandoned, and you will not be left behind. The media may get tired of this story, but we will not. We will be on your side and we will see this through." (Superville and Loven 2010)

"These folks work hard. They meet their responsibilities. But now because of a man-made catastrophe – one that's not their fault and that's beyond their control – their lives have been thrown into turmoil. It's brutally unfair. It's wrong. And what I told these men and women – and what I have said since the beginning of this disaster – is that I'm going to stand with the people of the Gulf Coast until they're made whole." (Weekly Presidential Address; 5 June, 2010)

"Make no mistake: We will fight this spill with everything we've got for as long as it takes. We will make BP pay for the damage their company has caused. And we will do whatever's necessary to help the Gulf Coast and its people recover from this tragedy....I will meet with the chairman of BP and inform him that he is to set aside whatever resources are required to compensate the workers and business owners who have been harmed as a result of his company's recklessness. And this fund will not be controlled by BP." (Remarks by the President to the Nation on the BP Oil Spill; 15 June, 2010.)

From Ken Salazar, Secretary of the Interior:

"They will be held accountable. We will keep our boot on their neck until the job gets done." (Jervis 2010)

"BP and everyone who is responsible for this catastrophe will be held accountable for their actions. And they, along with other offshore oil and gas operators will face more oversight, policing and safety standards." (Salazar 2010)

"We are fighting the battle on many fronts. At the President's direction, his entire team will not rest until the oil spill is stopped, the clean-up is completed, and the people, the communities, and the affected environmental are made whole. Let me be very clear: BP is responsible, along with others, for enduring that the flow of oil from the source is stopped; the spread of oil in the Gulf is contained; the ecological values and near shore areas of the Gulf are protected; any oil coming onshore is cleaned up; all damages to

the environment are assessed and remedied; and people, businesses, and governments are compensated for losses. From day one my job has been to make BP and other responsible parties fully accountable....And while the investigations as to the root causes are still underway, we will ensure that those found responsible will be held accountable for their actions...The President has been clear: we will not rest until this leak is contained and we will aggressively pursue compensation for all costs and damages from BP and other responsible parties.” (Salazar 2010)

From Janet Napolitano, Homeland Security Secretary:

“We are going to stay on top of this and stay on top of BP until this gets done and gets done the right way.” (Jervis 2010)

The Worst Case Scenario - How Much Oil?

The earliest news reports that followed the sinking of the oil rig began to speculate about how much oil had spilled and might spill by the time the crisis could be resolved. One of the first hurdles to overcome was the lack of knowledge by the majority of the audience about the typical unit of measurement for oil – the barrel, which is 42 gallons. Initial reports of the amount of oil being spilled each day had to be regularly calibrated in both barrels and gallons and it continued to be reported that way for quite some time. It is difficult to determine whether or not this confusion was ever resolved among the majority of the audience.

However, what proved to be more difficult was finding a way to get all of the major groups involved in the spill to agree upon how much was leaking each day and what the running total was. Competing interests regarding how much oil was leaking confounded any attempts to achieve such a consensus. Environmental groups were motivated to promote estimates on the high side and, unfortunately for BP, the fine that would eventually be paid to the Federal government was statutorily based upon the amount of oil spilled, putting them in a position to promote the lower estimates or, as was the case, attempt to deflect any discussion of the amount. Making a determination that could be used to calculate the fine would be a difficult task at best because it involved calculating the amount of oil leaking from a broken pipe 5,000 feet underwater. Using estimates from the underwater video camera and combining that with the amount of oil that was eventually captured at the surface by skimmers and other methods would turn out to be the best method. And although the end result would not be an absolute amount that could be categorically verified, it would result in a fairly sound estimate that could be used to calculate the fine.

The earliest reports in late April and early May pegged the leak at a mere 1,000 barrels a day, but after the amount was challenged by an environmental group, it was raised to 5,000. Once the underwater camera video became available for study, the Federal Flow Rate Technical Group began to broadcast a range of 12,000-19,000 per day by late May. By early June the same group had again increased the estimate and suggested it was 20,000-40,000 barrels a day. This estimate was increased yet again to 35,00-60,000 barrels a day just one week later in mid-June and remained the last estimate widely used before the leak was finally stopped, (Simon, White, Fausset 2010)

However, for financial reasons noted above, BP was in the unfortunate position of having to try and push the published estimates as low as possible. Any communications from BP executives would certainly be scrutinized when the calculations were being made, therefore in

almost every situation when a BP executive was asked about how much oil was leaking, they responded in one of two ways. First they either said their position was that the amount of oil spilled didn't matter because the important issue was getting the leak stopped and the spill cleaned up. While this may appear on its face to be the argument of a company more concerned about people over profits, given the emotional level of the audience, it had the opposite effect, sounding more like a company trying to deflect the question, which was exactly what it was doing. The second strategy was to be on the low end of what most scientific experts and governmental representatives were suggesting when BP was willing to provide an estimate. Inevitably, both of these positions caused BP to appear as though it were hiding something and doing so for purposes that assured the companies' profitability rather than its concern for the people affected by the spill.

It was, in many respects, a losing position all around for BP, although Peter Sandman has suggested that they did have a means by which they could both protect themselves and satisfy the audience, thereby increasing its level of trust and credibility among the audience, or at the very least, holding the level steady. His recommendation is to always err on the alarming side in crisis communications designed to help an audience bear its justified distress and that BP's failure to do early on in the crisis only fueled the controversy about how much oil was leaking helped generate accusations that BP was covering it up. Had BP's messages started out with estimates that were in the vicinity of the other experts and not consistently far below them, the audience's level of mistrust might not have been as high. Sandman says:

“BP's failure to err on the alarming side, early on, has turned the ongoing uncertainty about how many gallons/barrels of oil are escaping every day into a controversy that has provoked accusations of cover-up. The ordinary citizen hasn't a clue how many gallons or barrels constitute a really bad spill; we don't even know how many gallons in a barrel. We take our cues from accompanying language; 'only' 5,000 barrels a day is a lot smaller spill than 'as much as' 5,000 barrels a day. And we take our cues from how the numbers are changing. If BP keeps saying 5,000 a day and the other experts start saying 12,000 to 25,000 barrels a day, we're likely to conclude that BP has been intentionally downplaying the spill. That leaves us more distrustful and more alarmed than we would have been if BP had started with an estimate of 25,000 barrels a day. In a crisis it is extremely damaging to come back later and say 'it's worse than we thought'. Far better to come back later and say, 'it's not as bad as we feared'.”
(Sandman June 2010)

Other means of dealing with the estimate of oil would have been to continually focus on the ever-changing nature of the spill as is evidenced by a comment from Coast Guard Admiral Thad Allen, the Federal Government's Incident Commander for the spill:

“I think we are still dealing with the flow estimate. We're still trying to refine those numbers.” (Borenstein, Weber 2010)

As noted above, BP's attempts to stop the oil spill were complex and technical. Their ability to help the audience understand what happened to cause the explosion and fire and what was being attempted to stop the leak are also discussed above, however, BP appears to have missed a key opportunity to demonstrate in a visual message how much it was willing to disclose to the audience when they stonewalled attempts to have the video feed from the underwater camera broadcast live. At the time the issue of whether or not the camera view should be broadcast was being debated at the end of May, the anger and mistrust of the public was

beginning to grow. The efforts at stopping the spill via the “top kill” and “junk shot” maneuvers had recently failed, causing an already frustrated audience to become even more so. And even though all along BP had said that the only certain method of stopping the spill was to drill relief wells, a process that would take well into August to be successful, it is likely that most of the audience dismissed those statements in favor of what they were hearing and seeing in media reports about the efforts that were occurring in the immediacy of the crisis.

When the video feed first became available on May 28, 2010 via the Public Broadcast Stations’ “Newshour”, 1 million viewers tuned in and saw footage that must have been shocking and frustrating as they were able to clearly visualize how much oil were leaking from the well in a way that numbers of oil being spilled per day could not provide. Over the next few days as the video feed was broadcast more widely, numerous websites crashed due to the high volume of viewers attempting to download the video feed. Coupled with BP’s initial attempts to prevent the video feed from being able to be viewed by the audience and its ongoing attempts to brush aside the question of how much oil was being spilled, the audience’s level of fury only increased. From an Associated Press news story published on May 31, 2010 the following quote illustrates the mood of the audience:

“Faith in institutions – corporation, government, the media – is down. Americans are angry, and they long ago grew accustomed to expecting the resolution of problems in very short order. So when something undefined and uncontrollable happens, they speculate in all the modern forums about collusion and nefarious dealings.” (Anthony and Foster 2010)

It seems reasonable that BP would do all it could to stop the oil spill as quickly as possible. The delay in doing so caused their eventual fine to increase, the costs of the clean-up to mount as the oil continue to spill, and the value of the company’s stock was to continue its free-fall as long as the crisis occurred. Only audience members who truly look for conspiracy theories would suggest that BP was somehow delaying the final stoppage for reasons that would benefit the company. However, BP’s position of trust and credibility with the audience was damaged by its inability to appear to be in agreement with scientific and governmental estimates of the amount of oil being spilled as well as its unwillingness, at first, to allow the audience to see the oil spill via the underwater video camera.

The Worst Case Scenario – How Long Until the Leak is Stopped?

While there are many criticisms that can be drawn regarding the handling of crisis communications about the spill, there is one area where BP, in conjunction with the government, did an effective job. Almost from the beginning of the spill both parties resisted making specific predictions of how long it would take until the leak was finally stopped. In the early days of the crisis what happened and how to fix the leak were essentially unknown due to the uniqueness of the incident and the lack of previous experience in dealing with an underwater spill of the type and magnitude created by the rupture of the Deepwater Horizon pipeline. Most BP executives and government spokespersons reiterated that concept over and over again. BP and the government also articulated fairly early on that, while they would put forth numerous efforts to stop the leak all at the same time, all of the efforts, except for the drilling of a relief well, were simply their best attempts to try anything to stop the leak. They offered no guarantee of success and repeatedly stated that drilling relief wells would take a lengthy period of time. Resisting some type of guarantee by an organization is difficult to do in the midst of uncertainty and relentless

questioning about when the crisis will be resolved. Getting caught up in the need to provide guarantees and promises is something Sandman calls “overoptimistic over-reassurance” and always creates more problems in the end, particularly when the over reassurances fail to materialize. (As in the above example of how much oil was leaking.)

In early June when the second attempt to cap the leaking well appeared to be working, both BP representatives and President Obama voiced their hopeful pessimism:

“I would say things are going as planned. I am encouraged. But remember we only have 12 hours experience.” – Kent Wells, BP (Krauss and Fountain 2010)

“We are prepared for the worst, even as we hope that BP’s efforts bring better news than we’ve received before.” – President Obama (Krauss and Fountain 2010)

Initial estimates for the completion of drilling relief wells were made in May and June and consistently projected late summer, at best. When these estimates were first outlined, much of the audience expressed frustration at the length of time it would take. This frustration created a significant temptation to revise the estimates downward to placate an angry audience. Yet, both BP and the government continued to hold firm. Even in early July when efforts to stop the leak at the source through the top kill and junk kill maneuvers had not achieved any success, and progress at drilling the relief wells appeared to be ahead of schedule, neither party would budge.

“In a perfect world with no interruptions, it’s possible to be ready to stop the well between July 20 and July 27.” – Robert Dudley, BP Managing Director (Reeves and Breen 2010)

“There are certain things that can move that date up, but my official position is the middle of August. If it happens sooner than that, I think we can all jump for joy.” – Thad Allen (Reeves and Breen 2010)

And finally, when the second cap was placed over the leaking well and appeared to be holding, no one was willing to say that the situation was resolved.

“It’s a great sight. It’s far from the finish line. It’s not time to celebrate.” – Doug Suttles BP COO (Long, Weber 2010)

“...a positive sign, but we’re still in the testing phase.” – President Obama (Long, Weber 2010)

Choosing a Spokesperson Wisely and Knowing When to Let Them Go

Almost from the beginning, the most frequent voice of BP during communication events was its Chief Operating Officer, Tony Hayward. He endured hours and hours of relentless questioning by the media, had nearly his every waking move filmed and photographed, and undoubtedly spent countless hours and hours working on the crisis. In the enormous volume of quotes from him, several stand out as significant mistakes that caused untold damage to BP and the position it was trying to present to the audience. Given that BP’s status as a wealthy multi-national corporation with several other major disasters of recent memory (i.e. the Texas City oil refinery explosion in

2005 and the Prudhoe Bay, Alaska oil spill of 2006), BP started off at a disadvantage with the audience whose level of mistrust and anger were already in place. And while BP eventually did take Hayward out of many of the spokesperson situations, and moved him to a different position within the organization shortly after the spill had been capped, it is hard to determine when a spokesperson's gaffe is fatal.

Hayward's first misstatement came in early May when he tried to put into perspective the amount of oil that was flowing from the leak and the amount of potentially toxic dispersant that was being used to break up the oil in relation to the volume of the ocean. While his statement began with a fairly effective attempt to assure the audience that BP would stop the leak, he ended up with a quote that caused great controversy.

“We will fix it. I guarantee it. The only question is when. The Gulf of Mexico is a very big ocean. The amount of oil and dispersant we are putting into it is tiny in relation to the total water volume.” (Kollewe 2010)

Hayward later infuriated many Gulf Coast residents when he was quoted in an interview suggesting that Americans were likely to file bogus claims for compensation from damages from the spill (Mohr 2010) and just a few short weeks later, when tensions about the lack of success of the efforts by BP to stop the leak were beginning to rise, Hayward again began a message with an attempt to apologize to Gulf Coast residents, but ended the statement with a comment that created a firestorm of controversy, most likely responsible for his removal from the lead spokesperson role and one that will remain firmly entrenched in the minds of many members of the general public.

“We're sorry for the massive disruption it's caused to their lives. There's no one who wants this thing over more than I do, I'd like my life back.” (The Times Online May 2010)

The final blow appears to have been not as much about what Hayward said as what he did on June 19, 2010. Very few would dispute that Hayward deserved a day off due to the relentless schedule he had been keeping since mid-April. And just days earlier BP had made an unprecedented promise to set aside \$20 billion to help oil spill victims, money over and above what they were legally required to provide. But when Hayward was photographed attending an exclusive yachting competition in his native England, the level of trust and credibility among the primary Gulf Coast audience spiraled downward and would never recover. Shortly afterwards BP made it official and moved Hayward into a new position within a division of BP based in Russia and appointed Robert Dudley to the position of President and Chief Executive of a newly formed organization created to manage the spill and its aftermath; Gulf Coast Restoration Organization.

Summary

Space does not permit additional analysis of the numerous messages delivered by key BP executives and others involved in the Deepwater Horizon oil spill. And over the years, much more will be written with regards to their successes and failures of the efforts by various organizations to communicate during this crisis. Theoretical foundations established by experts in the field such as Vincent Covello and Peter Sandman as well as publications easily available through multiple governmental sources such as the Department of Health and Human Services, provide a wealth of key concepts that can help understand the use of risk and crisis communications relative to safety and health programs.

SH&E professionals are increasingly asked to provide more value to their organizations by increasing their knowledge base and skill set. Being able to assist in the crafting, and sometimes delivery, of risk and crisis communications is one way they can do so.

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