

Crisis Management

How Your Emotional Crisis Communication Infects Stakeholders and What to Do About It

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A narrative that moves beyond standard public relations advice to address the psychological undercurrents of crisis leadership.

Organizations often overlook how anxiety in crisis communications “infects” stakeholders, a phenomenon called “anxiety contagion”. Analyzing 505 responses via machine learning, this research quantifies how a leader’s emotional signature directly influences public reactions. Findings reveal that perceived organizational anxiety predictably increases stakeholder anxiety, whereas responsibility acknowledgment effectively mitigates this effect. The authors propose evidence-based strategies, including anxiety detection protocols and leadership emotional regulation training. Mastering this emotional dimension is essential for maintaining trust and business continuity.

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When AirAsia Flight QZ8501 disappeared from radar screens on December 28, 2014, CEO Tony Fernandes did something that would define crisis leadership for years to come. Within hours, he was on the ground in Surabaya, tweeting with raw emotion: “*My heart is*

filled with sadness for all the families involved in QZ 8501. On behalf of AirAsia my condolences to all. Words cannot express how sorry I am.” He didn’t hide behind corporate speak. He didn’t deflect. He simply expressed genuine human concern while maintaining operational control.

Compare this to Malaysia Airlines’ response to MH370 earlier that same year. For weeks, confusion reigned. Officials contradicted each other. Communications oscillated between defensive justifications and evasive non-answers. The airline’s anxiety was palpable, spread like wildfire among families and stakeholders, while the global community watched the tragedy unfold.

The stark contrast between these two Malaysian carriers’ crisis responses reveals a truth that every senior executive must understand: Your organization’s emotional signature during a crisis doesn’t just reflect your internal state. It actively transmits to and amplifies among your stakeholders, with measurable consequences for trust, reputation, and business outcomes.

The Hidden Force Multiplier in Every Crisis

As a senior executive, you understand that crises are inevitable and that managing the operational response is crucial. What’s far less understood, and what our research (Gruda and Ojo 2022) quantifies, is how the anxiety embedded in your crisis communications operates as an invisible force multiplier, potentially causing more damage than the original crisis itself.

We refer to this phenomenon as “anxiety contagion” (Gruda et al. 2023). It operates through emotional contagion mechanisms (Barsade 2002) and works exactly as the metaphor suggests. Just as a virus spreads from host to host, the emotional undertones of your crisis communications infect your stakeholders’ emotional states. Case in point: when Tony Hayward, BP’s CEO during the Deepwater Horizon disaster, infamously said “I’d like my life back,” he wasn’t just making a PR gaffe. He was transmitting his personal anxiety to millions of stakeholders, amplifying the crisis exponentially. And while our study focused on the existence of contagion rather than its speed, the social media context

suggests rapid transmission. Previous research by Kramer et al. (2014) indicates emotional contagion on social platforms can occur within hours of initial communication. This is driven by the real-time nature of social media interactions and the constant users' exposure to emotionally charged content.

Quantifying What Leaders Have Long Suspected

Using computational sentiment analysis on 505 stakeholder responses to 18 corporate crisis announcements (Gruda and Ojo, 2022), we quantify what seasoned executives have intuitively felt: the emotional temperature of your crisis response directly influences and can even inflame stakeholder reactions.

The implications are immediate and actionable. Unlike operational crisis management, which follows established protocols, managing your organization's emotional signature requires a fundamentally different approach. An approach that recognizes emotion not as a byproduct of crisis but as an active force that must be deliberately controlled. Here is what we found:

1. Anxiety is Contagious: Perceived organizational anxiety predicts subsequent public anxiety. This means that when your organization communicates with detectable anxiety during crises, public anxiety increases measurably and predictably. This emotional contagion occurs regardless of the specific content of the messages.

2. The Response Strategy Matters - But Not Always How You'd Expect: We examined three crisis response strategies based on Situational Crisis Communication Theory (Coombs and Holladay 2002):

- **Responsibility Acknowledgment (Apology/Justification):** As expected, this approach resulted in the lowest overall public anxiety levels, even when organizational anxiety was present.
- **Responsibility Minimization (Excuses):** This approach consistently backfired. When organizations made excuses while displaying anxiety, public anxiety increased

substantially.

- **Responsibility Evasion: The Trap of Short-Term Relief:** Perhaps our most counterintuitive finding concerns what happens when anxious organizations blame others. In our data, high organizational anxiety combined with blame-shifting sometimes resulted in lower public anxiety. This “blaming paradox” might occur because stakeholders temporarily accept the blame shift, reducing their personal threat perception. However, we caution against exploiting this paradox. While blame-shifting may provide a “sugar high” of reduced immediate anxiety, it creates a trust deficit that damages long-term relationships. The data clearly show that acknowledging responsibility produces better outcomes across all metrics.

Practical Implications

Based on our findings and subsequent validation work, we recommend five evidence-based strategies to manage your emotional signature:

1. **Establish Anxiety Detection Protocols:** Just as we used machine learning to detect anxiety, organizations can implement real-time monitoring of stakeholder communications across channels. Establish specific anxiety thresholds that trigger adjustments to the communication strategy when detected. When anxiety levels spike, adjust your communication approach immediately.
2. **Create a Crisis Communication Audit Team:** Before releasing any crisis communication, have it reviewed specifically for anxiety markers, which should be carefully avoided, including
 - **Defensive language patterns:** Words like “however,” “despite,” and “although” signal defensiveness. Therefore, instead of stating that “Although we followed all protocols...” say “We are actively investigating what happened.”
 - **Overuse of Qualifiers and Hedging:** Avoid excessive use of “might,” “possibly,” “somewhat,” and “arguably.” These words telegraph uncertainty and amplify stakeholder anxiety. Instead of saying “This might possibly affect some customers”, be more specific: “This affects approximately 1,000 customers in this region.”

- **Passive voice constructions:** Avoid stating that “Protocols were not followed” or “An oversight occurred”. Passive voice distances the organization from responsibility and paradoxically increases anxiety by suggesting a lack of control.
- **Excessive justification.** Long explanations of why something happened signal anxiety. Compare: “Due to unprecedented circumstances beyond our control stemming from multiple system failures...” versus “Our system failed. Here’s what we’re doing about it.” Long explanations may also be interpreted as a tactic of evading responsibility.

In the long term, consider establishing a *permanent* Crisis Communication Audit Team that provides rigorous, rapid, and real-time responses to stakeholder communications and raises awareness of risks. Anticipating potential negative public reactions enables prompt adjustments to the message’s content and form. Conversely, delayed “clarifying” reactions often backfire. For example, when Oxfam GB faced allegations of misconduct in 2018, its delayed and defensive explanations only reinforced the accusations and heightened public outrage—a phenomenon known as the “boomerang effect.” This, in turn, led to stronger **accusations** against the authors of those statements and the organization.

1. **Establish a “Responsibility Acknowledgment First” Policy:** Create an explicit crisis communication policy that prioritizes responsibility acknowledgment over blame-shifting or minimization. Develop specific language templates for acknowledgment that avoid legal liability while demonstrating appropriate accountability. Apple CEO Tim Cook’s apology **letter** (April 2013) addressed to Chinese customers is illustrative. It not only recognizes that “insufficient communications during this process has led to the perception that Apple is arrogant and disregard” and expresses “sincere apologies” but was also clear about the “four major adjustments” that the company was going to implement and, specifically, to the “clear and comprehensive repair and warranty policy” the company had adopted. Anna Han, an associate professor at Santa Clara University, **said** this letter of apology was smart because it signalled: “We’re accused of something, and we’re doing something about it”.
2. **Train Leaders in Emotional Regulation:** Implement regular simulations where executives practice crisis communications under pressure while receiving real-time feedback on anxiety signals in their messaging. Train leaders to recognize their own anxiety triggers and develop specific regulation techniques. It’s not about appearing emotionless - it’s about communicating concern without contagious anxiety. Recall

the Tony Hayward example mentioned earlier: effective training helps leaders recognize when their internal stress is about to leak into public messaging, allowing them to pivot to a stakeholder-centric script before speaking.

3. **Create Crisis Strategy Decision Trees.** The data are clear: Develop explicit decision trees for crisis communication that map crisis types to appropriate response strategies, with particular attention to anxiety-management considerations. Include specific response templates for each crisis type with pre-approved language that minimizes anxiety contagion.

Implementation Challenges and Solutions

Some implementation issues must be considered. We highlight the following:

- **Legal Concerns:** Many organizations fear that acknowledging responsibility equals admitting liability. However, there's a crucial distinction between expressing appropriate concern and accepting legal culpability. Work with legal counsel to develop language that demonstrates empathy without unnecessary exposure.
- **Executive Resistance:** Some business executives equate low anxiety with weakness. Reframe the conversation: Managing anxiety contagion is about maintaining control and demonstrating competent leadership during turbulent times.
- **Technological Barriers:** While our research used a machine learning algorithm to detect anxiety in corporate and stakeholder communications, organizations can start with simpler approaches. Equip your communications team with the "Anxiety Audit Checklist" provided above (e.g., checking for passive voice and hedging) to manually screen drafts.

Your Strategic Mandate

The implications of our research extend well beyond the communications department. The anxiety your organization projects during a crisis is not a passive byproduct; rather, it is an active force that spreads to stakeholders with measurable consequences for trust, reputation, and business continuity. Organizations that master the ability to communicate

with appropriate concern, but minimal contagion, will have a significant competitive advantage in crisis management. The choice is clear. Either manage your organization's emotional signature deliberately or watch as unmanaged anxiety amplifies every crisis you face.

As a senior executive, you set the emotional tone of your organization's crisis response. In moments of crisis, your leadership will be defined not only by operational response but also by your ability to contain and manage the emotional dimensions of the situation. Ensure you understand and manage this contagion effect in your organization, thereby preventing your own stress from becoming a multiplier that turns a situation from bad to worse.

Remember: your stakeholders aren't just listening to what you say. They're feeling what you feel. Make sure your emotional signature helps rather than harms you and your organization.

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