Conflict Positioning in Crisis Communication: Impact of Antecedent Conditions on Negotiation

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Abstract

Organizations need to position themselves favorably in times of crisis. The conflict positioning conceptualization offers a framework for organizations to do so by integrating insights of crisis communication with negotiation through the following steps. First, understanding the factors that will affect an organization's ability to handle the crisis. Second, based on the influence of these factors, examine the stance the organization will adopt. Third, examine the strategies the organization will embrace. Four, the strategies adopted will impact the conflict property it aims to resolve which will in turn influence the negotiation approach and the relationship dynamics between the organization and its publics. Last but not least, how these will impact the tactics enacted. Ten propositions, based on examination of five a priori factors which have also been validated in other studies, are examined. This is followed by application of how conflict positioning can occur in two real-life cases. This framework offers practical applications and theoretical implications.

Even as this study is being examined in 2020, governments all over the world are battling Covid-19, which the World Health Organization (WHO) has declared as a global pandemic (World Health Organization, 2020). The pandemic can be examined as a global conflict that requires the collaboration of all governments to resolve it (United Nations, 2020).

Conflict is defined as "an interactive process manifested in incompatibility, disagreement, or dissonance within or between social entities" (Rahim, 2002, p. 207). Jin et al. (2012a), citing Maslow (1943), argued that conflicts stem from a root cause: A threat that leads to crisis. For organizations, scholars have argued for public relations (PR) professionals to be at the forefront of managing conflict (Bowen, 2010; Hutton, 2010; Wilcox et al., 2015). As boundary spanners – representatives of the organization who monitor and facilitate organizational interaction with the external environment (Vasquez, 1996) – PR practitioners are expected to engage in strategic communications and conflict management to benefit the organization in a crisis (Wilcox & Cameron, 2007, p. 243). PR as a communication function ought to be viewed as negotiation, and more thought needs to be put into understanding how to develop the role, argued Vasquez (1996). Negotiation is communication, argued Ni et al. (2018), while Varma (2011) contended that it should form part of crisis communication.

Increasingly, scholars have argued for crisis communication to be positioned as, recognized as, and evolved into opportunities for organizational strategic thinking (Coombs, 2019). Strategic thinking is when organization uses the crisis occasion as a platform to validate its mission, values, and operations (Lerbinger, 1997). This involves an examination of the organization's epistemology, hierarchy, and existence (Seeger et al., 2003). Ulmer and Pyle (2016) argued that crisis communication should lead to the creation of favorable outcomes by negotiating with the parties involved. This study argues that organizations can do so through conflict positioning, i.e., situating themselves "favorably in anticipation of conflicts" (Wilcox et al., 2015, p. 260). To expand on the idea, this study proposes that organizational factors critical in determining its position are identified, and its position, or what this study terms conflict stance, enacted. Conflict stance will influence crisis response strategies, and thereafter impact negotiation approach and tactics.

The significance of this study is three-fold. First, it is arguably one of the first studies that integrates crisis communication with conflict management. Diers-Lawson and Pang (2021) noted that traditionally, conflict and crisis were pursued as separate streams with little overlap. This ought to change given the interconnectedness of issues, organizations, and publics. Second, conflict positioning conceptualization calls for a synoptic and systemic rather than a symptomatic approach to crisis communication and negotiation. This framework not only integrates stance and strategies, but also explicates negotiation approach and tactics. Thus far, each set of literature, be they crisis, negotiation or conflict management, has been scant in addressing this. Vasquez (1996) argued that there is a greater need to integrate negotiation into crisis communication. This framework aims to do that. It forms what Liu and Viens (2020) described as multiphase scholarship, understanding how crisis proceed, take shape and is resolved. Third, conflict positioning conceptualization is theory building. By integrating crisis and conflict theories with insights from negotiation, this study proposes a new theoretical perspective that builds new grounds in understanding how organizations can conduct themselves from how they communicate in times of crises to how negotiation can be enacted. Liu and Viens (2020) reflected the arguments among scholars that theory must advance practice, and it is hoped that the theoretical and practical insights drawn from this study can benefit them.

Literature Review

Conflict Management: The PR Approach to Negotiation

If PR is negotiation (Vasquez, 1996) and PR professionals are called to "employ strategies to assist negotiation" to resolve conflicts (Wilcox et al., 2015, p. 260), how do they manage conflict and negotiation? Vasquez (1996) argued that one role is in the exchange of offers and counteroffers. This perspective resonates with the dual concern model by Pruitt and Rubin (1986), which posits that "individual and situational factors affect two critical variables that comprise a negotiator's motivational orientation: Their concern about their own interests and their concern about the interests of the party with whom they are negotiating" (Rhoades & Carnevale, 1999, p. 1778). High other-concern emerges when negotiators are motivated to cooperate, while high self-concern surfaces when negotiators are motivated to compete or demonstrate toughness (Dreu et al., 2000). Anchored on two axes, self-concern on the X-axis and other-concern on the Y-axis, the model is a mix of responses and will be elaborated below.

Given that PR involves the strategic management of competition and conflict to benefit one's organization – and when possible – also for the mutual benefit of the publics (Wilcox et al., 2015), how can this be achieved in conflict management, crises and negotiation? The next sections review dominant crisis, conflict and negotiation theories, concepts and tactics; address and fill theoretical gaps; and integrate the theories, leading to the conceptualization of conflict positioning.

Crisis Communication: Stance and Response Strategies

Three of the most dominant theories in crisis communication are contingency theory of strategic conflict management (CTSCM), image repair theory (IRT), and situational crisis communication theory (SCCT) (An & Cheng, 2010; Avery et al., 2010; Frandsen & Johansen, 2017, 2020; Liu & Fraustino, 2014). CTSCM is a stance-driven approach based on key factors, whereas IRT and SCCT are strategies-driven approaches. The following sections provide an overview of these three theories.

Contingency Theory of Strategic Conflict Management: A Stance-Driven Approach Based on Key Factors

Coombs (2010a), citing Botan (2006), described CTSCM as a "grand theory of public relations." A grand theory attempts to explicate how PR "can be adapted to specific areas of the discipline" (Coombs, 2010a, p. 41). It began as a PR theory in the 1990s, and was recognised as a crisis theory in the 2000s (Frandsen & Johansen, 2017). The theory argued that because of the complexity in strategic communication, organizational response during a crisis is best enacted through a continuum of stance, which has at one end of the continuum advocacy, and at the other end accommodation, as illustrated below in Pang et al. (2020).

Pure   --   Pure
Advocacy   Accommodation
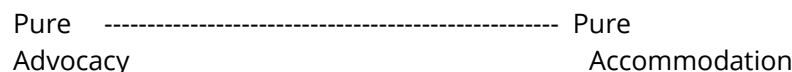
The theory offered a matrix of 87 factors that an organization could draw from to determine its stance. Between advocacy which means arguing for one's own case, and accommodation which means giving in, is a range of operational stances that influence strategies and entail different degrees of advocacy and accommodation (Pang et al., 2020). Any of the factors could affect the location of an

organization on the continuum at a given time towards a given public (Pang et al., 2020). The theory, thus, sought to understand the dynamics, within and outside the organization that could affect an organization's stance. There are factors that influence the organization's position on the continuum *before* it interacts with a public; and those *during* the interaction. The former are categorized as predisposing variables, while the latter, situational variables. Some well-supported predisposing factors included: (1) The size of the organization; (2) Corporate culture; (3) Business exposure; (4) PR to dominant coalition; (5) Dominant coalition enlightenment; (6) Individual characteristics of key personnel, like members of the crisis management team. The dominant coalition can be defined as members of senior management, or people who enact policies (Sriramesh, 2010). Situational variables shift the organization from a predisposed accommodative or adversarial stance when the organization interacts with the public. Some well-supported situational factors included: (1) Urgency of the situation; (2) Characteristics of the other public; (3) Potential or obvious threats; (4) Potential costs or benefit for the organization from choosing various stances.

Moral, legal, and regulatory factors that affect accommodation are labelled as proscriptive variables. Six were identified: (1) When there is moral conviction that an accommodative or dialogic stance towards a public may be inherently unethical; (2) When there is a need to maintain moral neutrality in the face of contending publics; (3) When legal constraints curtail accommodation; (4) When there are regulatory restraints; (5) When the dominant coalition prohibit an accommodative stance; and (6) When the issue becomes a jurisdictional concern within the organization, and resolution of the issue takes on a constrained and complex process of negotiation (Pang et al., 2020).

CTSCM thus offered two critical insights in crisis communication: First, **contingency factor**: What are the key antecedent factors that impact crisis communication? These antecedent factors were drawn from the roles they play in predisposing, situational and proscriptive variables in CTSCM; Second, **conflict stance**: How do the key antecedent factors impact the organization's position on the contingency continuum?

Image Repair and Situational Crisis Communication Theories: Strategies-Driven Approach

IRT is based on the assumption that maintaining a favorable reputation is a key goal in communication (Benoit & Pang, 2008). Face, image, and reputation are threatened during a crisis and the theory provides a series of options that communicate and repair bruised image. There are five general strategies and 14 options (Benoit & Pang, 2008). They are:

- Denial, with two variants: *Simple denial* involves either denying that an offense occurred, or refuting allegations that the accused performed the offense. *Shifting the blame* asserts that another party is responsible.
- Evasion of responsibility, with four variants: *Provocation* suggests that the offense was committed in response to a prior offense by another party. In *defeasibility* the accused contends a lack of information or control. *Accident* asserts that the situation occurred unintentionally. *Good intentions* suggest that the offense was committed with expectations of a positive outcome.
- Reducing offensiveness, with six variants: *Bolstering* highlights positive traits of the accused. *Minimization* suggests that the offense is less serious than perceived. In *differentiation*, the offense is compared to a more undesirable event. *Transcendence* are attempts to reframe the offense positively. *Attacking the accuser* strives to reduce the credibility of accusers and *compensation* occurs when something of value is offered to the victims.
- Corrective action reassures that steps are being taken to solve or prevent future crisis.
- Mortification involves an admission of wrongdoing and apology.

While IRT is textual, SCCT is contextual (Frandsen & Johansen, 2020). The latter proposes that strategies be selected based on intensifying factors like prior reputation, attribution of responsibility and crisis history of the organization. The SCCT presents 10 strategies divided into three postures: Deny, diminish, and deal (Coombs, 2008).

- Deny has three sub-categories. *Denial* is that no crisis occurred. The accused may *attack the accuser* by confronting their claims or employ a *scapegoat*, blaming others.
- Diminish has two strategies. *Excuse* is responsibility minimization – denying intent to commit offense or claiming a lack of control. In *justification*, the accused minimizes the seriousness of the offense.
- Deal includes five sub-categories. In *ingratiation*, publics are praised to remind them of the good work. *Concern* may be expressed for victims or *compensation* provided in the form of gifts or money. The accused *express regret* by indicating remorse for the situation or issue an *apology* by taking responsibility and seeking forgiveness.

Amalgamation of Crisis Strategies

Pang et al. (2012) proposed the Extended Crisis Responses Framework (ECRF) by integrating IRT and SCCT with CTSCM. Ismail et al. (2019) considered the ECRF as a collection of the most comprehensive set of strategies in crisis response.

In many respects, the three communication theories and the combination in the ECRF are complementary and supplementary in understanding how stance impact crisis response strategies. CTSCM is based on analyzing an organization's stance before it enters into communication whereas crisis response strategies are based on analyzing an organization's strategies as it enters into communication. Given the natural integration of stance and strategies, (Benoit, 2004, Coombs, 2010b; Marcus & Goodman, 1991), one framework that attempted to integrate them can be seen in Figure 1.

Figure 1

Extended Crisis Response Framework (Pang, Ho, & Malik, 2012)
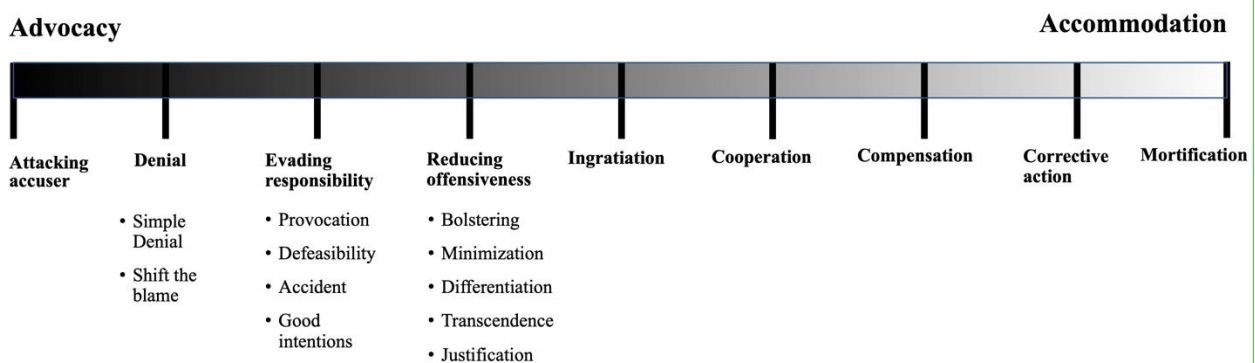
The **response strategies**, particularly the ECRF, thus offered a critical insight in crisis communication: How would the strategies be enacted based on the contingency factor and conflict stance?

From Crisis Communication to Negotiation: Filling Theoretical Gap

While the integration of stance with strategies fills a gap in research, it has not addressed the next part of the puzzle: How does this inform negotiation. This study attempts to do so by drawing on insights on conflict (Ni et al., 2018; Wang et al., 2012); negotiation (Dreu et al., 2000; Pruitt & Rubin, 1986; Rhoades & Carnevale, 1999; Wang et al., 2012) and crisis negotiations (Taylor, 2002; Taylor & Donald, 2004).

To fill the theoretical gap, three lines of research to integrate crisis communication with conflict and negotiation are proposed: First, **conflict management**. This addresses the conflict property that needs to be resolved. The properties are drawn from Ni et al. (2018) who defined conflict as "perceived incompatible verbal or nonverbal activities between interdependent parties in achieving salient goals; it is prone to arouse emotional responses" (p. 120). The six properties are: (1) "perceived interdependence with the other party"; (2) "perceived incompatibility" of goals; (3) "perceived incompatibility of verbal and nonverbal activities; (4) "these activities often involve goal-oriented, or intentional communicative acts"; (5) "these activities are prone to arouse intense emotions"; (6) "these activities may evolve based on the dynamics of the encounter" (p. 120).
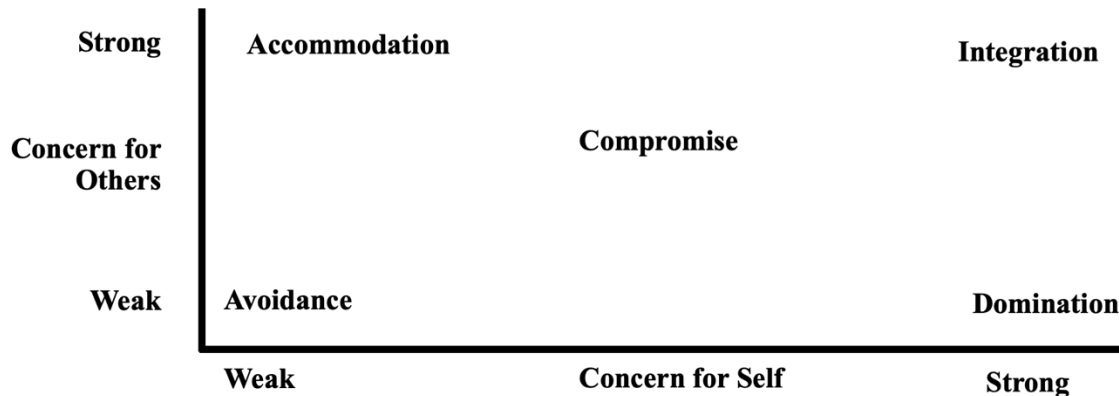
Second, the **negotiation approach and relationship dynamics**. Based on the dual concern model discussed above, the organization can either adopt high other-concern or high self-concern. High other-concern emerges when organizations are motivated to cooperate while high self-concern appears when organizations are motivated to compete or demonstrate toughness (Dreu et al., 2000). Anchored on two axes, self-concern on the X and other-concern on the Y is a mix of responses. Wang et al. (2012) argued where there is high self-concern and low other-concern, the strategy is domination, i.e. "demanding that others give in to one's positions" (p. 227). Where there is low self-concern but high other-concern, accommodation – "a strategy of giving in to satisfy another party's interests" (p. 227) – is used. Where is there high-concern for positive outcomes for both parties, integration, "a strategy of maximizing gains for bother parties" (p. 227), is exercised. Where there is low concern for self and

others, avoidance, "a strategy of inaction" (p. 227) is used. Compromise, "a strategy of finding a middle ground for both sides" (p. 227) occurs when there is moderate concern for both parties' outcomes. Wang et al. (2012) further elaborated two tasks or functions in interpersonal relationships. The socioemotional function "reflects an affective connection" (p. 225) while the instrumental function "reflects the degree of usefulness" (p. 225) to achieve personal gains (see Figure 2).

Third, **negotiation behaviors**. Insights are drawn from Taylor (2002) and Taylor and Donald's (2004) cylindrical model of communication behavior in crisis negotiations. The framework postulates three levels of orientation: Integrative (cooperative), distributive (antagonistic) and avoidance (withdrawn) (Taylor, 2002). Underlying each level are identity, instrumental and relational themes, which describes the motivation of the engagement. These are manifested in behaviors adopted (see Table 1 for orientation, motivation and behavior).

Integrating these components, the conflict positioning conceptualization is based on a series of theoretical propositions. Favorable positioning in a crisis, thus, involves understanding a series of components. First, the factors that affect an organization's ability to handle the crisis, and based on the influence of these factors, the stance the organization is likely to adopt; second, the strategies adopted based on the stance; third, the conflict property the organization aims to resolve; fourth, the adopted negotiation approach and the relationship dynamics between the organization and its publics; and fifth, the tactics to be enacted (see Figure 3).

Figure 2

Dual concern model (adapted from Wang, Fink, & Cai, 2012)

Strong	Accommodation		Integration
Concern for Others		Compromise	
Weak	Avoidance		Domination
	Weak	**Concern for Self**	**Strong**

Conflict Positioning in Crisis Communication for Negotiation: A Conceptualization

This section begins with contingency factors. The five contingency factors examined are involvement of dominant coalition, influence of PR in the crisis, influence of legal in the crisis, importance of the primary publics to the organization, and the organization's perception of threat to its reputation. Validated in studies (Hwang & Cameron, 2008, 2009), these *a priori* factors are derived from the importance they play in the clusters of variables in CTSCM. The role of the dominant coalition is examined in the predisposing and proscriptive cluster of variables; PR is examined in the predisposing cluster of variables; legal is examined in the predisposing and proscriptive cluster of variables; primary publics is examined in the situational and proscriptive cluster of variables; and threat is examined in the situational cluster of variables. These five factors, both internal and external, are critical (Jin et al., 2021). In CTSCM, the dominant coalition has been examined for its leadership roles (Jin et al., 2006, 2007; Pang et al., 2006) with PR (Li et al., 2010; Shin et al., 2006) and legal (Reber et al., 2003) as important components in the crisis management team (Jaques, 2016). As these internal factors are examined, two external factors of threat (Pang et al., 2006) and the importance of primary publics (Benoit, 1997; Coombs, 2010b) remain critical to study. While not exhaustive, these five factors represent an important first step in the synthesis of theoretical insights.

Table 1

Cylindrical Model of Communication Behaviour in Crisis Negotiation (Taylor & Donald, 2004)

Orientation	Motivation	Behavior		
Integrative	Instrumental	• Offer • Integrative	• Compromise • Comply-Demand	• Promise • Accept-Offer
	Identity	• Allure • Compliment	• Empathy • Negative-Self	• Apology • Common
	Relational	• Reassure • Confidence	• Encourage • Discourage	• Humour • Agree
Distributive	Instrumental	• Reject-Demand • Threat-Action	• Reject-Offer • Demand	• Alternative
	Identity	• Criticism • Commitment	• Insult • Profanity	• Personal Superiority-self
	Relational	• Excuse	• Justify	• Appeal
Avoidance	Instrumental	• Avoid • Shift	• Retract	• Inaction
	Identity	• Denial	• Accuse	• Provoke
	Relational	• Negative-Reply	• Submissive	• Interrupt

Figure 3

Conflict Positioning for Negotiation
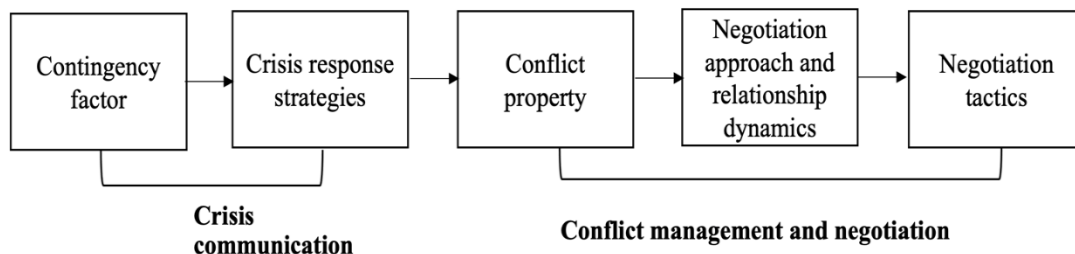
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Contingency Factor: Involvement of Dominant Coalition

CTSCM describes the dominant coalition in various characteristics, such as its values, style, altruism level, and support and understanding of communication. Using CTSCM to study how the United States and China resolved the crisis over the collision of a US Navy reconnaissance plane with a Chinese fighter jet in the South China Sea in April 2001, Zhang et al. (2004) found the hawkish characteristics of the dominant coalition in the US government a key factor in its less than accommodative stance. Pang et al. (2006) also found that the singular weight of the dominant coalition overwhelmed all other factors, namely PR department characteristics, PR access to the dominant coalition, and characteristics of line managers in deciding how far crisis preparation could go. Other studies also supported the importance of the dominant coalition during crisis (Coombs, 2019; Marra, 1998; Ulmer, 2001).

Conflict Stance. Current studies, however, are not conclusive as to what stance, more or less accommodative, an organization is likely to adopt should the dominant coalition determine the direction in crisis communication. CTSCM argues that this is dependent on the situation. Proscriptive factors in the theory, like whether the organization maintains a moral conviction to enter into dialogue, or if dominant coalition agrees to an accommodative stance, can perhaps provide some indication the stance the organization is likely to take.

What is clear, however, is that if the dominant coalition decides on a particular stance, it is highly likely to maintain it (Reber et al., 2003). The authors found that the dominant coalition's less accommodative stance left "no room for compromise or accommodation" (p. 7). Leichty (1997) found that if there is a shared mission of progress with the public, there would likely be an accommodative stance. Depending on the situation, a dominant coalition heavily involved in crisis communication may adopt either a more accommodative or less accommodative (advocacy) stance.

Crisis Response Strategies. Benoit (1995a) argued that a crisis demands that the dominant coalition act decisively and immediately. Englehardt et al. (2004) found the dominant coalition employing more accommodative strategies like mortification. Similarly, Drumheller and Benoit (2004) found that when the dominant coalition employed mortification and bolstering strategies, they were effective in defusing an emerging crisis.

Conflict Property to Resolve. The organization needs to decide on three key conflict properties: Are the goals compatible with the publics? Is there interdependence with the publics? What are the evolving dynamics of the situation?

Negotiation Approach and Relationship Dynamics. Based on the above arguments, the organization appears to have three options: Exercise high self-concern, exercise high other-concern, or exercise low concern for self and others, informed by whether they regard their relationship with publics as socioemotional or instrumental.

Negotiation Behaviors. Taylor (2002) and Taylor and Donald (2004) had not addressed what factors caused the organization to adopt certain tactics. Assumptions from the model's workings with insights from crisis leadership (Argenti, 2017; Lucero et al, 2009; McLean & Ewart, 2020; Pang & Appasamy, 2019) suggest that the dominant coalition sets the tone of organization engagement (Orientation). If the tone calls into question the organization's raison d'etre, vision, mission and values, then it would draw on its identity or relational themes (Motivation).

Theoretical Propositions Concerning Dominant Coalition

The following propositions are posited.

Proposition 1. When the dominant coalition is involved in crisis communication, the organization is likely to:
a) Adopt a less accommodative stance if moral, legal, regulatory and jurisdictional factors prohibit it from accommodating its publics;
b) Utilize less accommodative crisis response strategies like denial, evading responsibility, and reducing offensiveness;
c) Manage the evolving dynamism of the situation to resolve the conflict;
d) Exhibit low concern for self and others, thereby adopting the strategy of avoidance as it enters into negotiation; likely to view relationship with its publics as instrumental;
e) Employ tactics that are more avoidance in orientation, instrumental in motivation, and behaviors would likely be to avoid, shift, retract or demonstrate some form of inaction.

Proposition 2. When the dominant coalition is involved in crisis communication, the organization is likely to:
a) Practice a more accommodative stance if the moral, regulatory, legal, and jurisdictional factors *do not* prohibit it from accommodating its publics;
b) Utilize crisis response strategies like ingratiation, cooperation, compensation, corrective action, and mortification.
c) Resolve the conflict to emphasize interdependence;
d) Exhibit high concern for others, thereby adopting the strategy of accommodation as it enters into negotiation; likely to view relationship with its publics as socioemotional;
e) Employ tactics that are more integrative in orientation, identity or relational in motivation, and behaviors would likely be to compliment, empathize, apologize, reassure or agree.

Contingency Factor: Influence of PR in the Crisis

CTSCM describes the influence of PR practitioners through its position in the organizational hierarchy; its representation in the dominant coalition; and the potential of PR to practice various models of communication. Ahmad and Idid (2020) found practitioners to be "dominant and important" in shaping crisis responses (p. 11). Yeo and Sriramesh (2009) stated that for them to be effective, they must play strategic roles. Bowen (2009) suggested that PR could demonstrate value to the dominant coalition if they work through a crisis situation, thereby creating value for the organization (Zerfass & Viertmann, 2017).

Conflict Stance. Reber and Cameron (2003) found that the greater the influence PR had on the crisis, the greater the likelihood the organization would enter into dialogue with its publics. Hoger and Swem (2000) submitted that PR "move quickly from reaction to effective pro-action and interaction" (p. 430) to generate collaboration. This can be done by shaping public perception through the use of media (Pang, 2013; Pang et al., 2018). Bowen (2009) described PR as "ethics counsel" (p. 271) while Lee and Cheng (2011) described them as demonstrating ethical leadership. These suggest that where possible, PR would likely recommend more accommodative stances aimed at protecting image and reputation (Coombs, 2019).

Crisis Response Strategies. Benoit (2004) argued for a "prominent company spokesperson" (p. 276) to manage the crisis, while Zhang and Benoit (2004) found that when PR had influence, it generated positive outcomes for the organization. Englehardt et al. (2004) found that PR could help the dominant coalition position the organization favorably; and when PR took charge proactively, the dominant coalition followed (Drumheller & Benoit, 2004).

Conflict Property to Resolve. The organization needs to decide on three key conflict properties: How can incompatibility be bridged through verbal and nonverbal activities? How to build interdependence with the publics? How can communication be goal-oriented and intentional?

Negotiation Approach and Relationship Dynamics. Based on the above arguments, organization appears to have two options: Exercise high concern for others and self, informed by their socioemotional relationship with its publics.

Negotiation Behaviors. The cylindrical model did not examine the factors that caused the organization to adopt certain tactics. Assumptions from the model's workings with insights from studies examining the interplay of roles between organizational leaders and PR (Lucero et al, 2009; Jaques, 2016, 2020; Vasquez, 1996) suggest that if PR had influence on the dominant coalition, they would be able to advise on the tone of organization engagement and possibly recommend integrative approach (Orientation). The advice moving forward could be instrumental or relational (Motivation).

Theoretical Propositions Concerning PR

Based on the above discussion on the influence of PR in crisis communication, the following propositions are posited.

Proposition 3. When PR practitioners have influence in crisis communication, the organization is likely to:
a) Be more accommodative with the aim of positioning the organization in a good light;
b) Mount a consistent defense based on crisis response strategies such as ingratiation, cooperation, compensation, corrective action and mortification;
c) Underscore interdependence and bridge incompatibility of goals;
d) Exhibit high concern for positive outcomes for both parties as it enters into negotiation; the strategy is integration – informed by PR – and regards the relationship with its publics as socioemotional;
e) Employ tactics that could be integrative in approach (Orientation), utilizing instrumental or relational themes (Motivation). The behavior could be instrumental (offer, compromise, comply) and relational (reassure, encourage, humor, agree) for integrative orientation.

Proposition 4. When PR practitioners have less influence and autonomy in crisis communication, the organization is likely to:
a) Be less accommodative
b)   Utilize crisis response strategies such as attacking the accuser, denying, evading responsibility, and reducing offensiveness;
c) Focus on incompatibility of goals and disregard the intense emotions felt by publics;
d) Adopt a low concern for others, which may or may not necessarily be accompanied by high concern for self as it enters into negotiation. Strategy is likely to be avoidance, informed by its regard of its relationship with its publics as instrumental.
e)   Employ tactics that could be distributive or avoidance in approach (Orientation), utilizing either instrumental or relational themes (Motivation). The behavior could be instrumental

(reject, demand, threat, alternative) and relational (excuse, justify) for distributive orientation, or instrumental (avoid, shift, retract) and relational (negative reply, submissive) for avoidance orientation.

Contingency Factor: Influence of Legal in the Crisis

CTSCM labels this factor as the existence or impact of the legal department. Their role in a crisis cannot be underestimated as they can exert much influence (Fitzpatrick, 1996). Of the six proscriptive factors prohibiting accommodation and communication, three relate to legal: Legal constraints, regulatory constraints, and jurisdictional constraints. Martinelli and Briggs (1998) argued that traditionally, PR and legal practitioners often took diametric approaches in crisis communication. Attorneys, noted Fitzpatrick and Rubin (1995), tended to advise organizations to adopt any of the following strategies: Never admit blame; say nothing; say as little as possible and release information as quietly as possible; cite privacy laws, company policy or sensitivity as reasons for not releasing information; deny guilt and/or act indignant against accusations; and shift/share blame. Termed "traditional legal strategy" (p. 25), it often runs contrary to "traditional public relations strategy" (p. 25) where practitioners promise to investigate allegations, announce and implement corrective actions.

Conflict Stance. It would seem that if legal is deeply influential, the organization would be less accommodative, with minimal communication to prevent legal liability (Jaques, 2016). Reber et al. (2003) also found that when both legal and PR shared a common goal during a crisis, with PR practitioners setting the communication strategies and legal practitioners reviewing these strategies, the organization would be more accommodative. However, if legal assumes stronger influence, the stance is likely to be more advocative (Jaques, 2020).

Crisis Response Strategies. Benoit (2004) implied that the legal department could potentially damage the image of an organization if it was given too much responsibility during a crisis. It could, for a start, prevent the organization from engaging in mortification, even if the organization was, indeed, responsible for the offensive act because "admission of guilt could exacerbate legal difficulties" (p. 276). Benoit (1995b) found that using an attorney to communicate during the crisis was ineffective because (1) it "fostered the impression that upper management considered the allegations of fraud unworthy of their attention" (p. 97); and (2) attorneys might recommend denying the problem existed, even when evidence showed otherwise, "to avoid litigation" (p. 97).

Conflict Property to Resolve. The organization, through its legal counsel, is likely to highlight a key conflict property – incompatibility.

Negotiation Approach and Relationship Dynamics. Based on the above arguments, it appears one approach is likely – low concern for others and high concern for self.

Negotiation Behaviors. The cylindrical model did not examine the factors that caused the organization to adopt certain tactics. Assumptions from the model's workings with insights from examining the interplay of roles between legal and PR (Fitzpatrick, 1996; Fitzpatrick & Rubin, 1995; Hoger & Swem, 2000; Jaques, 2016, 2020) suggest that if legal practitioners had more influence, the tone of engagement would likely be distributive or avoidance in approach (Orientation). The themes utilized would be instrumental (Motivation), targeted at resolving the issue at hand.

Theoretical Propositions Concerning Legal

The following propositions are asserted.

Proposition 5. When legal is more influential, the organization is likely to:
a) Be less accommodative;
b) Utilize crisis response strategies like attack the accuser, deny, evade responsibility, and reduce offensiveness;
c) Focus on incompatibility of goals;
d) Adopt a low concern for others and high concern for self, informed by its regard of the relationship with its publics as instrumental when it enters into negotiation. The strategies are avoidance if there is low concern for others, or domination, if there is high concern for self.
e) Employ tactics that could be distributive or avoidance in approach (Orientation), utilizing instrumental theme (Motivation). The behaviors could be instrumental (reject, demand, threat) and relational (excuse, justify, appeal) for distributive orientation, or instrumental (avoid, shift, retract) and relational (negative reply, interrupt) for avoidance orientation.

Proposition 6. When legal is less influential, the organization is likely to:
a) Be more accommodative;
b) Utilize crisis response strategies like ingratiation, cooperation, compensation, corrective action and mortification;
c) Either address the intense emotions from publics and focus on finding common grounds to build interdependence or address the incompatibility of goals.
d) Compromise if it seeks to find moderate concern for both self and others aimed at developing common ground to resolve the situation, informed by its regard of its relationship with its publics as socioemotional as it enters negotiation. If it focuses on incompatibility of goals, it is likely to adopt low concern for others. The strategy used would be avoidance when it regards its publics as instrumental.
e) Employ tactics that could be avoidance or integrative (Orientation), utilizing instrumental or relational themes (Motivation). The behavior could be instrumental (offer, compromise, comply) and relational (reassure, encourage, humor, agree) for integrative orientation, or instrumental (avoid, shift, retract) and relational (negative reply, submissive) for avoidance orientation.

Contingency Factor: Importance of the Primary Publics to the Organization

Some of the key characteristics describing a public, based on CTSCM, are the degree of source credibility/powerful members or connections; past successes or failures of groups to evoke change; and relative power of the public. A key task for the organization in a crisis is to connect with primary publics (Jin et al., 2012b). Stephens et al. (2005) discussed publics in times of crises as one defined by the management. In listing the best practices in crisis communication, Seeger (2006) inferred that the publics must be important to the organization as a whole. One way to examine who these publics are important to in the organization could be viewed through first, who the crisis messages are intended for (Stephens et al., 2005); and second, which publics are likely to seek these information (Austin et al., 2012); and third, their power, legitimacy and urgency (Coombs & Holladay, 2012). Publics are likely to be employees, customers, members of the community, unions, and stockholders (Fearn-Banks,

2014; Lukaszweski, 1997). Falcao et al. (2020) argued that the publics can be identified by both PR and management. Once identified, the organization must communicate with them through the news media (Seeger, 2006) and social media (Yeo et al., 2020).

Conflict Stance. Reber et al. (2003) found it was important to win over "key publics" (p. 8). Reber and Cameron (2003) noted that the publics' characteristics would predispose an organization to dialogue. If the organization regarded the demands of the primary publics in a crisis as unreasonable or felt that it was bounded by moral conviction not to deal, it would likely adopt a less accommodative stance. If, however, the organization regarded the primary public as important, and its demands reasonable, it would likely adopt an accommodative stance (Pang et al., 2020).

Crisis Response Strategies. Benoit and Pang (2008) emphasized the importance of primary publics in a crisis. Benoit (2004) called for identification of salient audiences so as to tailor the messages to them. "The closer the audience is to the harm, the harder persuaders will probably have to work to restore their image" (p. 279).

Conflict Property to Resolve. If the organization considers its publics as priority, it would aim to address the publics' intense emotions and build interdependence through communication. If not, it would focus on incompatible goals.

Negotiation Approach and Relationship Dynamics. Based on the above arguments, it appears two approaches are conceivable: high concern for others or low concern for others.

Negotiation Behaviors. The cylindrical model did not examine the factors that caused the organization to adopt certain tactics. Assumptions from the model's workings with insights from crisis leadership (Argenti, 2017; Lucero et al, 2009; McLean & Ewart, 2020; Pang & Appasamy, 2019) suggest that if publics are prioritized, the approach would be integrative (Orientation), utilizing the themes of identity and relational (Motivation).

Theoretical Propositions Concerning Primary Publics

The following propositions are asserted.

Proposition 7. When the organization regards the primary publics as important during a crisis, and if it is not prohibited – out of regulatory, legal, jurisdictional, or moral constraints from accommodating them – the organization is likely to:
a) Be more accommodative;
b) Utilize crisis response strategies like ingratiation, cooperation, compensation, corrective action and mortification;
c) Accentuate interdependence;
d) Exhibit high concern for others, where the strategy is accommodation, informed by its regard of the relationship with its publics as socioemotional when it enters into negotiation;
e) Employ tactics that could be integrative (Orientation), instrumental or relational themes (Motivation). The behavior could be instrumental (offer, compromise, comply) and relational (reassure, encourage, humor, agree) for integrative orientation.

Proposition 8. When the organization regards the primary publics to be less important during a crisis, it is likely to:
a) Be less accommodative;
b) Utilize less accommodative crisis response strategies such as attacking the accuser, denying, evading responsibility, and reducing offensiveness;

c) Focus on incompatibility of goals and disregard the intense emotions felt by publics;

d) Adopt a low concern for others, which may or may not necessarily be accompanied by high concern for self when it enters into negotiation. The strategy is likely to be avoidance, informed by its regard of the relationship with its publics as instrumental;

e) Employ tactics that would be more avoidance in approach (Orientation), utilizing instrumental theme (Motivation), and behaviors would likely be to avoid, shift, retract or demonstrate some form of inaction.

Contingency Factor: Organization's Perception of Threat to its Reputation

Threat is a well-supported situational variable in CTSCM. It describes the urgency of the situation, potentially damaging publicity and tarnishing the organization's reputation. Jin et al. (2012a) argued that threats can be examined according to type (internal or external), levels (low, medium, or high) and duration (short-term or long-term). Jin et al. (2006) argued threats can be perceived in two ways that affect reputation – culpability and locus of control. If the organization is perceived as culpable, it is highly likely to utilize more accommodative strategies to control the damage. If the locus of control of the crisis lies with the organization, it is likely to be more accommodative; if the locus of control is external, it is likely to be less accommodative.

Conflict Stance. Burnett (1998) found that organizations that had strong vulnerability to threat appeared to be better prepared (p. 487). Penrose (2000) argued that perceptions of threat could cause a dramatic shift in message output. Threat could be perceived either as a crisis or an opportunity. Organizations that regarded threat as a crisis tended to restrict communication, leading to the adoption of a less accommodative stance. Those that see threat as an opportunity were more proactive in their communication and adopted more accommodative stances.

Crisis Response Strategies. Benoit and Pang (2008) argued that threat is associated with loss of image and reputation, and threats to the image of the organization are "ubiquitous" (p. 244). Brinson and Benoit (1999) found that when the level of threat increased, the organization "wasted no time" (p. 484) to come up with strategies to deal with the looming crisis. Thus, it could be assumed that as the organization's perception of threat level increased, the more proactive it would be in employing accommodative strategies to deal with the crisis.

Conflict Property to Resolve. It appears that if the organization considers managing the threat as priority, it would build interdependence through communication. If not, it would focus on incompatible goals.

Negotiation Approach and Relationship Dynamics. Based on the above arguments, two approaches are conceivable: high concern for others or low concern for others.

Negotiation Behaviors. The cylindrical model did not examine the factors that caused the organization to adopt certain tactics. Assumptions from the model's workings with insights from threat literature suggest that if the organization regards the immediate threat as high, that it jeopardizes the organization's sustainability, its response would be integrative (Orientation), and would draw on its identity and relational themes (Motivation).

Theoretical Propositions Concerning Threat

Based on the discussions of the organization's perception of threat, the following propositions are posited.

Proposition 9. When the threat appears to have more severe impact on its reputation, and the organization is perceived to be culpable where the locus of control is internal, the organization is more likely to:

a) Be more accommodative to resolve the crisis;
b) Utilize crisis response strategies like ingratiation, cooperation, compensation, corrective action and mortification;
c) Emphasize interdependence;
d) Exhibit high concern for others as the organization enters into negotiation, where the strategy is accommodation, informed by its regard of the relationship with its publics as socioemotional;
e) Employ tactics that would be more integrative in orientation, identity or relational in motivation, and the behaviors would likely be to compliment, empathy, apology, reassure, encourage or agree.

Proposition 10. When the threat appears to have less severe impact to its reputation, and the organization is perceived to be less culpable where the locus of control is external, the organization is likely to:

a) Be less accommodative;
b) Utilize crisis response strategies that are denial, evading responsibility, and reducing offensiveness;
c) Focus on incompatibility of goals and disregard the intense emotions felt by publics;
d) Adopt a low concern for others, which may or may not necessarily be accompanied by high concern for self as it enters into negotiation. The strategy is likely avoidance, informed by its regard of the relationship with its publics as instrumental;
e) Employ tactics that would be more avoidance in orientation, instrumental in motivation, and behaviors would likely be to avoid, shift, retract or demonstrate some form of inaction.

Propositions of Conflict Positioning: Reflection on the Organization

Having discussed all the propositions above, Table 2 provides an overview of how each component is connected, based on the Conflict Positioning for Negotiation framework set out in Figure 3. The framework examines five factors that impact how the organization conducts itself, from how it engages in crisis communication to how it manages conflict and enacts negotiation approach and tactics.

Based on the propositions, what is evident are two distinct approaches in conflict positioning for negotiation. The first approach is one where the organization appears to be more collaborative. This is one where the dominant coalition is not inhibited (i.e., prohibited by moral, legal, regulatory and jurisdictional factors) and where the public relations function has more influence over legal in times of crises. The organization also regards its primary publics as important and regards the severity of the impact the crisis imposes on the organization. The second approach is one where the organization appears to be less collaborative. This is one where the dominant coalition is inhibited (i.e., prohibited by moral, legal, regulatory and jurisdictional factors) and where legal has more

influence over the public relations function in times of crises. The organization also does not regard its primary publics as important and does not consider highly the severity of the impact the crisis imposes on the organization.

Table 2

Propositions of Conflict Positioning

Contingency Factor	Stance *Accommodation level*		Crisis Response Strategies *Accommodation level*		Conflict Properties		Negotiation Approach *Concern for Others*		Negotiation Tactics *Orientation*	
	Less	More	Less	More	Incompatibility	Interdependence	Low	High	Avoidance	Integrative
Dominant Coalition • *Inhibited*	✓		✓		Manage Situation		✓		✓	
• *Not inhibited*		✓		✓		✓		✓		✓
Public Relations • *More influence*		✓		✓		✓		✓		✓
• *Less influence*	✓		✓		✓		✓		✓	
Legal • *More influence*	✓		✓		✓		✓		✓	
• *Less influence*		✓		✓		✓	Moderate Concern			✓
Importance of Primary Publics • *More important*		✓	✓			✓		✓		✓
• *Less important*	✓		✓		✓		✓		✓	
Threat • *More impact on reputation*		✓		✓		✓		✓		✓
• *Less impact on reputation*	✓		✓		✓		✓		✓	

Practical Application of Conflict Positioning: How Two CEOs Managed Crisis

In this section, two crises that made headlines are applied to test the theoretical robustness and ecological validity of the conflict positioning conceptualization. The cases are described and the propositions demonstrated. As the data is drawn primarily from news artifacts, news releases and videos, not all propositions can be fully explored if further organizational insights are required. Each case is explored on its own.

United Airlines' Dragging Crisis (2017)

The United Airlines' dragging crisis dominated global attention in 2017. On April 9, 2017, Dr David Dao was forcibly ejected from an overbooked United Express Flight 3411 for refusing to disembark to make space for cabin crew. The incident was captured on video, which went viral the same day with over 19 million Facebook (FB) views. In a press release issued on April 10, CEO Oscar Munoz did not address how Dr Dao was treated but instead focused on how other passengers were inconvenienced. The mismanagement of the crisis was a "total disaster" (Petroff, 2017). By April 11, United's market value had dropped by US$1 billion. The lawyers for Dr Dao threatened to sue (Aratani, 2017). Two days after the incident, on April 11, CEO Munoz backtracked. That led to a series of events that slowly restored United's reputation.

In the first 24 hours in the management of the crisis, the CEO (**contingency factor of dominant coalition**) appeared to be less accommodative (**conflict stance**). Applying **crisis response strategies** in his statement, the CEO wrote, "This is an upsetting event to all of us here at United

[denial of the dragging]. I apologize for having to re-accommodate these customers [reducing offensiveness]. Our team is moving with a sense of urgency to work with the authorities and conduct our own detailed review of what happened [reducing offensiveness]. We are also reaching out to this passenger to talk directly to him and further address and resolve this situation [reducing offensiveness]" (Associated Press, 2017). The **approach** used was low concern for Dr Dao, the victim, and the **strategy** was avoidance, informed by the relationship dynamics as instrumental. The **tactics** appeared to be avoidance in orientation, instrumental in motivation, and the behaviors exhibited appeared to be shift attention. **Proposition 1** is argued to apply.

On April 11, the CEO's position (**contingency factor of dominant coalition**) became more accommodative (**conflict stance**) in orientation as the organization finally recognized the importance of the public, the victim who was hurt, and the other publics – the customers who were offended by the mistreatment of a passenger (**contingency factor of importance of the publics**). Applying **crisis response strategies** in his statement, he addressed the mistreatment of Dr Dao for the first time: "The truly horrific event that occurred on this flight has elicited many responses from all of us: outrage, anger, disappointment. I share all of those sentiments, and one above all: my deepest apologies for what happened [Mortification]. Like you, I continue to be disturbed by what happened on this flight and I deeply apologize_to the customer forcibly removed and to all the customers aboard [Mortification]. No one should ever be mistreated this way. I want you to know that we take full responsibility and we will work to make it right [Corrective action]. It's never too late to do the right thing. I have committed to our customers and our employees that we are going to fix what's broken so this never happens again [Corrective action]. This will include a thorough review of crew movement, our policies for incentivizing volunteers in these situations, how we handle oversold situations and an examination of how we partner with airport authorities and local law enforcement. We'll communicate the results of our review by April 30th [Corrective action]" (Associated Press, 2017).

The approach showed high concern for Dr Dao, reconstructing the relationship as socioemotional. The strategy was accommodation and tactics were integrative in orientation, identity in motivation, and the behaviors exhibited were apology and empathy. Propositions 2 (contingency factor of dominant coalition) and 7 (contingency factor of importance of primary publics to the organization) are argued to apply. Proposition 9 is argued to hold as the threat to its reputation (contingency factor of organization's perception of threat to its reputation) was high; culpability and locus of control were internal. It is not known the influence of PR and legal in this case. However, PR experts not involved in the case said the CEO should have "quickly offered an unreserved apology" (Petroff, 2017) right at the start. If that is the case, proposition 3 (contingency factor of influence of PR in the crisis) is argued to apply.

Marriott International's Crisis Management of Covid-19 (2020)

The United Airlines CEO's actions is contrasted with how the late Marriott International CEO Arne Sorenson, who passed away on 15 Feb 2021 from cancer, managed Covid-19. On March 19, 2020, Marriott International posted a six-minute video on its FB and Twitter page to employees. Sorensen addressed how Covid-19 had affected Marriott's businesses globally. Its revenue had fallen nearly 75% worldwide (Marriott CEO Speech, 2020). The crisis had "a more severe and sudden financial impact on our business than 9/11 and the 2009 financial crisis – combined" (Marriott CEO speech, 2020). As a result, Marriott had to take unwelcome action, said Sorensen. These included suspension of non-essential travel for staff; requiring an estimated two-thirds of their staff at their headquarters and across properties abroad to be on furlough (Marriott CEO Speech, 2020). Even as he called for

sacrifices from his employees, Sorensen discussed how he and the dominant coalition would do their part to manage Covid-19. Several propositions could be examined here.

First, the involvement of the CEO and top management (**contingency factor of dominant coalition**). Sorensen said, "Both Mr Marriott and I will not be taking any salary for the balance of 2020 and my executive team will be taking a 50 percent cut in pay" (Marriott CEO Speech, 2020). The **conflict stance** was more accommodation, using the **crisis response strategy** of corrective action. The **conflict property** underscored interdependence. The negotiation **approach** was one of high concern for others, thereby adopting the strategy of accommodation, informed by their relationship with their publics as socioemotional. The **tactics** was more integrative in orientation, relational in motivation, and the behaviors exhibited were compliment, empathize, apologize, reassure or agree. **Proposition 2** is argued to apply.

Even as Sorensen set the context, it was how he communicated that drew attention. First, his communication with his key publics, the employees, and how the situation would impact them. He said, "As a leader, I have experienced so many wonderful highs and a good number of challenging lows. I can tell you that I have never had a more difficult moment than this one. There is simply nothing worse than telling highly valued associates, people who are the very heart of this company that their roles are being impacted by events completely outside of their control. I have never been more determined to see us through than I am at this moment." Applying the conceptualization, it could be seen that **Proposition 7** applies. The **conflict stance** was more accommodative, the **crisis response strategy** was ingratiation, the **negotiation** approach showed high concern for others, and he regarded them as socioemotional. The **tactics** could be integrative in approach (Orientation), utilizing relational themes (Motivation). The behavior exhibited was relational (reassure, encourage, humor, agree) for integrative orientation.

The threat imposed by Covid-19 on the organization (**contingency factor of the organization's perception of threat to its reputation**) is also evident. Since this was an externally driven crisis and culpability on the organization was less severe, **proposition 10** is argued to apply. This has meant adopting a less accommodative stance towards managing the threat by imposing belt-tightening measures on employees through the foregoing non-essential travel, requiring an estimated two-thirds of the staff at their headquarters and across properties abroad to be on furlough (Marriott CEO Speech, 2020).

Additionally, what was instructive was the circumstances in which the video was made. Sorensen appeared bald and went against the advice of his team to appear on this video. He said, "Our team was a bit concerned about using a video today because of my new, bald look. Let me just say that my new look is exactly what was expected as a result of my medical treatments. I feel good and my team and I are 100 percent focused on overcoming the common crisis we face". In May 2019, Marriott disclosed that Sorenson had stage two pancreatic cancer (Bhattarai, 2019), and had undergone surgery after chemo, radiation and immune therapy (Armental, 2019). The team, presumably the PR, was reluctant to let him appear on camera (Schaal, 2020). It appears **proposition 2** outweighs **proposition 3** – to good measure. Forbes reported that Sorenson was "candid, vulnerable, humble, emotional and hopeful" (Gallo, 2020, para. 4). Harvard Business Review noted that his openness and honesty won over Marriott employees worldwide and the general public (Sundheim, 2020). He was awarded The Legend in Leadership Award by the Yale School of Management's Chief Executive Leadership Institute (Chief Executive Leadership Institute, 2020).

Conclusion

This study first argues the gap between crisis communication, conflict management and negotiation and how that gap can be bridged. The conflict positioning conceptualization is developed in this study and the implications are considerable. First, negotiation and crisis communication have been operating in silos. This is an opportunity to integrate the work through inter-disciplinary research. Second, this new framework can serve as a predictive model. By understanding the confluence and integration of these elements, it gives organizations greater insights into how its crisis communication can impact negotiation. Third, this work is about building theoretical insights to advance systematic and rigorous understanding of the respective fields. It is hoped this framework will be the first step in developing a new theory.

One limitation of this framework is that while it has identified the antecedent factors, it is not able to assess the possibility of cross-contamination of factors and the relative weightages of each of these factors in conflict positioning. The next step is to test how each factor impacts the others. Future studies can also examine other contingency factors other than those derived in this conceptualization that would affect stance, strategies and negotiation tactics. Another limitation is that this framework examines from the organization's perspective and does not examine publics' perspectives, which Coombs (2010b) argued required further attention. A future iteration of the model can include understanding publics' perspectives in order to help PR practitioners fulfil their roles as boundary spanners more effectively.

Theory building and development has been gradual (Frandsen & Johansen, 2017). Yet it is imperative to continually build a structure to help us order, explain, predict and control, argued Chaffee and Berger (1987), and in this case, particularly one that integrates different fields of studies. In theory building for crisis communication, Coombs (2008) argued that it must go "beyond the explanatory function of theory to prediction and control" (p. 263). This conceptualization, besides aiming to develop theoretical insights, hopes to provide a framework to guide organizations to predict the course of their actions to give them some semblance of control.

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