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## Putting out the Cerro Grande fire: a case study in government crisis communication Conference Item [paper]

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Everybody knew it was bound to happen. The Ponderosa pines were too thick, and large portions of New Mexico were essentially kindling waiting for a spark. A 1998 National Forest Service report cited a 30% chance of a large fire near Los Alamos within five years (Johnson, 2000). A second study prepared by the Department of Energy in 1999 reiterated that a significant fire was likely (Johnson). In early May 2000, National Park Service (NPS) personnel conducted a briefing at Los Alamos National Laboratory as part of a conference titled *Wildfires 2000: Los Alamos at Risk* (Kenworthy and O’Driscoll, 2000). There would be a fire, but answers as to exactly when or where remained unobtainable. Anything could start the fire—a negligent camper, a lightning strike—but nobody would have guessed that New Mexico’s biggest wildfire to date would be triggered by people trained to extinguish fires.

NPS employees at Bandelier National Monument, located roughly 45 miles away from the state capital, Santa Fe, recognized the danger and sought to alleviate some of the immediate threat by conducting a prescribed burn to clear out dangerous fire fuels. In other words, they planned to fight fire with fire—a common fire prevention tactic. Unfortunately, within 20 hours of its initiation the “controlled” burn grew distinctly uncontrollable (National Park Service, 2000f). The fire would eventually scorch 47,000 acres and destroy more than 400 homes. The price tag for the blaze would approach half of a billion dollars (Denver Post, 2003).

In this paper, we review the media communication strategy the National Park Service employed in response to the crisis, which came to be known as the Cerro Grande Fire. Specifically, we ask:

- What was the National Park Service's media response to the crisis?
- Did the National Park Service's media response reflect "best practices" in crisis management?
- Was the National Park Service's response appropriate for the type of crisis?

Given the dearth of articles focusing on government organizations' management of crisis communication, our paper will add to the literature by applying it to this relatively uncharted territory. We applied some of the well documented crisis management principles in terms of initial response and media strategy to the NPS, a component of the United States Department of Interior. Our goal was to ascertain whether government institutions, like their private industry counterparts, can benefit from some or all of the best practices consistently cited by crisis communication researchers.

## METHODOLOGY

In analyzing this crisis and the National Park Service's (NPS) response to it, we used the case study method, for as Yin (1994) points out, case studies are particularly viable "when the investigator has little control over events, and when the focus is on a contemporary phenomenon within some real-life context" (p.1). Yin further asserts that, "evidence for case studies may come from six sources: documents, archival records, interviews, direct observation, participant-observation, and physical artifacts" (p. 102).

As our aim was to analyze the organization's media strategy (and because we did not have direct access to either the personnel or events involved), we focused primarily on media coverage of the events surrounding the Cerro Grande Fire. Specifically, we reviewed the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *USA Today*, *Christian Science Monitor*,

*Santa Fe New Mexican, Albuquerque Journal, Denver Post, Denver Rocky Mountain News, Houston Chronicle, Chicago Sun-Times, Independent, Claims Magazine, and Cable News Network.* This list of sources provided a broad view of coverage in national, regional, print, and broadcast media. Because the focus of the study was on initial response, the scope of our analysis stretched from May 9, 2000, the day press coverage of the fire began, through the end of that month. However, we did review follow-up pieces with dates as late as 2003 to better compile a full history of the crisis.

In addition, we obtained and reviewed NPS and Cerro Grande Fire Joint Information Center press releases archived on the NPS web site as well as other official NPS documents such as its “morning reports,” timelines, and other data posted on the web specifically for press use. We reviewed both the initial National Interagency Fire Center investigative report into the fire as well as the final NPS Board of Inquiry Report on the Cerro Grande Fire. Finally, we reviewed sections of the U.S. government’s Field Operations Guide for incident command systems.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Much has been written about crises. The existing literature aims to answer questions regarding the nature of crises (e.g. Coombs 1999a), how to best manage crises when they occur (e.g. Coombs 1999a, Fearn-Banks 1996, Burnett 1998 Marra 1998), how to best communicate during a crisis (e.g. Fitzpatrick 2000, Coombs 1999a, Coombs 1999b, Kaufmann et al 1994, Fitzpatrick & Shubow Rubin 1995), and how to repair any damage done and learn for next time (e.g. Benoit 1997, Hearit 1999, Coombs & Schmidt 2000).

### Crisis Definition

First, a brief look at how we define crises. According to Coombs (1999a), “a crisis can be defined as an event that is an unpredictable, major threat that can have a negative effect on the organization, industry, or stakeholders if handled improperly. A crisis is unpredictable but not unexpected” (p.2). This definition is extremely interesting because it focuses on the fact that organizations should expect crises, and therefore be prepared for them, but at the same time should accept that one can’t be prepared for all eventualities.

Coombs (1999a) creates a master list of crisis typologies to help explain the different ways in which crises can manifest themselves. His list includes nine types: natural disasters, malevolence, technical breakdowns, human breakdowns, challenges, megadamage, organizational misdeeds, workplace violence, and rumors, into which most crises can quite easily be placed.

### Crisis Management

Coombs (1999a) also points out that most organizations can conduct a ‘crisis audit’ to determine which crises a specific organization is most likely to encounter. Therefore, crisis management is a “process of strategic planning for a crisis or negative turning point, a process that removes some of the risk and uncertainty from the negative occurrence and thereby allows the organization to be in greater control of its own destiny” (Fearn-Banks, 1996, p.2). Control is an operative word in crisis management. While crisis preparedness and management are important, it would seem that they are a means to an end: controlling the crisis. Be it controlling its spread, controlling the way in

which it is perceived or controlling the outcome of the crisis, organizations strive to be in better control of their destiny.

“Crisis management... requires that strategic action be taken both to avoid or mitigate undesirable developments and to bring about a desirable resolution of the problems” (Burnett, 1998, p.476). Coombs (1999a) gets into the detail of the kind of strategic preparation required: “all organizations should prepare to handle crises by addressing six concerns: diagnosing vulnerabilities, assessing crisis types, selecting and training the crisis team, selecting and training the spokesperson, developing the crisis management plan (CMP), and reviewing the communication system” (p.59).

However, as Marra (1998) says: “excellent crisis public relations practice is not solely the result of creating a thorough list of instructions and checklists...the underlying communication culture of an organization... can easily prevent (or enhance) practitioners from implementing the best crisis communication plan” (p.464). Thus, it is communication that drives crisis management, or as Fitzpatrick (2000) says, “while ineffective communication can turn a manageable situation into a full-blown disaster, a well-managed crisis response can turn a potentially devastating situation into a positive experience for the organization” (p.394).

#### Crisis Communication Best Practices

“What the organization says and does once a crisis begins (the crisis response) can have a significant effect on the success of the crisis management effort (Benoit, 1997)” (Coombs, 1999b, p.125). Burnett (1998) puts crisis communications into the sphere of public relations: “public relations is above all an effort to mitigate uncertainty.

It can do so either by manipulating publics' behavior or, in the case of crisis, by being proactive and deal with this type of uncertainty strategically" (p.487).

### *Speedy and Forthcoming Information*

Most of the authors agree that speed is of the essence in crisis communication: "the ability to communicate quickly and effectively is clearly an important component of successful and effective crisis management" (Marra, 1998, p.462). In his article about Apollo 13, Kauffman (2001) asserts that: "organizations facing a crisis should at least do the following: 1) Respond quickly; 2) Tell the truth; 3) Provide a constant flow of information, especially to key publics" (p.438). Coombs (1999a) points out that: "crisis managers are encouraged to be quick, consistent, open, sympathetic, and informative" (p.114).

### *Matching Communication to Crisis*

What one says and how one says it also has an impact. Fitzpatrick and Shubow Rubin (1995), set out four strategies that characterize the ways in which organizations typically communicate during crises: the traditional public relations strategy, which focuses on helping a company obtain public forgiveness and rebuild credibility; the traditional legal strategy, which takes into account the potential adverse consequences of admitting guilt too early; a mixed strategy, which combines the first two strategies; and the diversionary strategy, which employs tactics of questionable ethics and viability.

While deliberating which strategy to employ, Kaufmann et al. (1994), recommend that "a careful and thoughtful program of matching the communications method to the crisis may be the answer to surviving the thorniest of organizational challenges" (p.39)

and they set out five questions to help crisis managers determine whether to adopt a policy of full or limited disclosure:

Could non disclosure be fatal or lead to further injury? Is your organization the culprit or the victim? Are the fictions surrounding the crisis worse than the facts? Can your organization afford to respond after the crisis? Can your organization afford *not* to respond? (p.35).

Coombs (1999a) develops a categorization system to determine the most suitable response for each type of crisis, setting them out on a response continuum ranging from accommodative responses to defensive ones. Coombs combines this continuum with one ranging from strong organizational crisis responsibility to weak crisis responsibility, and thus creates a tool to help managers better match crisis and communication strategies.

#### *Responsibility, Corrective Action, and Compassion*

Hearit (1999), has advice on how to achieve forgiveness: “once an organization is willing to demonstrate to key publics and society that it shares the publics’ view of the criticism, the company is absolved of its guilt” (p.295), and also “the wisest response for a company is to quickly extricate itself from a problem by issuing an apology and announcing a change in policy” (p.304).

Benoit (1997) agrees that “a firm commitment to correct the problem- repair damage and/or prevent future problems- can be a very important component of image restoration discourse. This would be especially important for those who admit responsibility” (p.181). In addition, according to Coombs and Schmidt (2000), an organization must also demonstrate concern for victims and regret, as these “may be a key indicator that an organization has learned its crisis lesson” (p.174). Coombs (1999b)

sheds further light on which responses suit which crises when he finds that just as with transgressions and product-harm crises, “the best way to maximize both social and legal concerns during an accident crisis seems to be to incorporate compassion into the crisis response” (p.139).

### Crisis Communication in Government

The vast majority of existing crisis communication literature examines crises with which corporations have been faced. When it comes to examining crises in the public sector, there are very few sources for review, and they seem to share a common message: the need for better communication. McManamy (1995), when talking about the tragic attack on the Federal Building in Oklahoma City, states that: “the most valuable lessons learned so far show a need for improved lines of communication and a clearer chain of command, especially for incidents involving multiple government agencies” (p.54). Mitka (2003), when describing staged mock terror attacks in two American cities, which set out to test and improve city and health authorities’ response strategies and capabilities, reported that: “one area that many thought needed improvement was communication between government agencies at various levels and between those agencies and hospitals” (p.2928). These two authors are talking about communication between the various agencies. McConnell and Stark (2002) bring this issue into the sphere of crisis response: “Most crises require a focused, coherent response, although often there is a tendency towards paralysis through bureaucratic conflict and/or operational fragmentation” (p.671-2). McConnell and Stark also touch on another aspect of crisis management in the public sector: “it is crucial to understand that managing any

crisis is not simply a technical matter of finding the optimal scientifically-based ‘solution’ and implementing it. It is also about politics” (p.664).

These sources point to the fact that even though the same principles apply, in practice crisis communication in a public sector setting is likely to be somewhat different to crisis communication in the private sector, due to the complex structures and political interests inherent in government agencies.

### Summary

The best practices chosen to analyze the National Park Service’s crisis communication are: 1) the speed with which the organization responded, and the degree to which their response was forthcoming; 2) the compatibility of the response to the crisis, and the disclosure policy applied; 3) the degree to which the organization accepted responsibility, promised corrective/ preventive action, and expressed compassion for the crisis victims.

## CRISIS CHRONOLOGY

### Lighting the Fire

On May 4, 2000, after contacting the National Weather Service to confirm the weather forecast, fire management personnel at Bandelier National Monument (BNM) ignited a test fire near the summit of Cerro Grande. Upon completion of the test fire, Mike Powell, the lead fire management officer—determined that the fire behavior was within acceptable parameters and decided to continue with the prescribed burn (National Interagency Fire Center, 2000). Only 38 of the 3,746 prescribed fires set by the National Park Service (NPS) since the program began in 1968 have “escaped” (Watson, 2000). Similarly, of the 31,200 prescribed burns conducted by the country’s multiple land

management agencies from 1995-2000, only 0.5% eluded containment (Baldauf, 2000). Even BNM specifically had successfully managed two or three controlled burns per year over the previous decade (Janofsky, 2000). Unfortunately, this fire was about to become an exception to the rule.

By early the next morning the winds had changed and the fire began to slop over predetermined boundaries. All attempts to stop its progress failed (Marshall, 2000).

By that afternoon, Powell was forced to declare the prescribed burn a wildland fire—a moniker that automatically prompted additional federal assistance. By May 8, the fire was only 40% contained and had burned over 550 acres; press coverage began in earnest. By May 9, almost all major newspapers started covering the story. Regional papers—the Albuquerque Journal and Santa Fe New Mexican—were running almost a dozen stories a day through most of May. National coverage increased as the fire scorched more acres and began to threaten homes and the Los Alamos National Laboratory. Several local television stations began almost continuous coverage simultaneous with the first evacuations (Chavez, 2000).

No stranger to the world of wildfires, NPS is one of many agencies that every year participates in national fire fighting efforts coordinated by the National Interagency Fire Center (NIFC) in Boise, Idaho. Because no single agency had the resources to fight large scale wildfires, the NIFC coordinated the efforts for the entire nation, calling on personnel from the NPS, Forest Service, Bureau of Land Management, and others, both to physically fight the fire and provide support services such as public information.

### Crisis Communication

The Cerro Grande Fire Joint Information Center (CGFJIC) was established shortly after a wildfire was declared. The earliest press release listed in National Park Service (NPS) archives was issued on May 10. The release included notice of a media briefing for later that afternoon. The briefing was open to the public (CGFJIC, 2000a). Unfortunately, the location of the CGFJIC and its telephone numbers were changed at least three times during the unfolding crisis (CGFJIC, 2000b). Although the NPS did use a link from Bandelier National Monument's (BNM) home page to provide information about the fire to the public, its "press page," contained only minimal information such as a biography of BNM's superintendent, pictures of the regional director, and a map of the area, (NPS, 2000e).

As a result of the severe nature of the Cerro Grande fire, a Type I incident team was deployed to the fire on May 8 (NPS, 2000a). A type one incident team, according to the United States government's Field Operations Guide: Incident Command System (1990), includes (among many other resources) an Information Officer who is a member of the command staff and is responsible for handling media relations as well as coordinating public information activities with other jurisdictions.

Whomever the official information officer was, he or she appeared to have little impact as the only identifiable quote from the individual appears in the CGFJIC's own press release on May 10. In fact, of the press reports reviewed, only two (Jehl, 2000a; Pincus, 2000) quoted NPS officials and none referenced the CGFJIC information officer during the height of the crisis in May and June 2000. The only other visible quotes from NPS personnel appear after the NPS issued its final report on the fire in June of 2001

(Smith, 2001). During the actual event, statements about the fire were issued by such diverse spokespersons as the White House Spokesperson (Duggan, 2000), Forest Service officials (Houston Chronicle News Service, 2000; Sterngold, 2000), the Secretaries of Interior and Agriculture (Janofsky, 2000; Cable News Network, 2000), various state and local officials (Janofsky, 2000; Pincus, 2000), and even the President of the United States (NPS, 2000b).

### A State of Emergency

As the crisis evolved, wind conditions exacerbated the situation, so that on May 11, the fire was only 5% contained, had burned over 10,000 acres, and required the evacuation of approximately 11,000 residents (NPS, 2000b). The governor of New Mexico and President Clinton declared a state of emergency (NPS, 2000b). Also on May 11, federal officials initiated a nationwide 30-day moratorium on prescribed burns (Hughes, 2000) and Secretary of the Interior Babbitt announced that an interagency investigation of the events surrounding the fire was due on his desk within a week.

A joint statement of the Secretaries of Interior and Agriculture expressed sympathy for those who lost homes and gratitude that no injuries had resulted from the fire so far. It further assured stakeholders that putting out the fire was the top priority of both departments and that the secretaries were personally monitoring these efforts (NPS, 2000c). In addition, the Federal Emergency Management Agency and the State of New Mexico created a disaster recovery center for those affected by the fire as well as toll free lines for questions regarding disaster assistance (Cerro Grande Fire Joint Information

Center, 2000c). The National Park Service (NPS) followed suit with its own information center and toll-free line shortly thereafter (NPS, 2000d).

Meanwhile, Roy Weaver, the superintendent of Bandelier National Monument, who initially stated that conditions had seemed proper for a prescribed burn (Pincus, 2000), accepted responsibility for the blaze and was placed on administrative leave (Hughes, 2000), although unnamed officials said the move was not a result of Weaver's decisions regarding the fire (Houston Chronicle News Service, 2000). Following his retirement in July of the same year, Weaver expressed his regret for authorizing the prescribed fire, indicating he was only free to do so because he no longer represented the NPS (News staff, 2000), perhaps because, "statements by any company representative about a matter within his or her scope of employment are treated as statements of the company, regardless of whether the individual was authorized to make such a statement" (Kaufmann et al., 1994, p.34).

### Media Coverage

Despite the direct and sometimes extreme impact this crisis had on some stakeholders—residents evacuated and some who eventually lost their homes as well as the 10,000 Los Alamos laboratory employees who could not get to work for several days (Chicago Sun-Times, 2000)—there were relatively few articles aimed at chastising the National Park Service (NPS). That said, the press coverage did contain statements from upset citizens questioning why the NPS would start a fire during the spring when winds are particularly unpredictable. One evacuee stated that, "spring here is always very windy. They should have waited" (Houston Chronicle News Services, 2000, p.1).

Although most press reports at this point continue to mention that NPS personnel started the blaze, they do so only parenthetically. A large number of news reports focused instead on the policy of prescribed burns and their effectiveness. One reporter described a “subtext of anger” in Los Alamos toward the NPS, but argued that the feeling masked the much larger and more complex issue of what steps man can or should take to alter nature (Baldauf, 2000, p.1).

### Taking the Blame

When Secretary of Interior Babbitt released the preliminary investigation report about the causes of the fire at a news conference in New Mexico on May 18, he was strongly critical of National Park Service (NPS) decisions and planning. Babbitt immediately indicated that the government was entirely at fault and would compensate the victims (Janofsky, 2000). In particular, the report critiqued Bandelier National Monument personnel’s plan for the prescribed burn, which described the likelihood of the fire going awry as moderate. The plan also cited potential backlash regarding controlled fires if this one were to exceed its boundaries and endanger Los Alamos National Laboratory (Jehl, 2000b). These comments now seem prophetic. Further, the NPS was cited for lacking provisions to manage media on the fire (National Interagency Fire Center, 2000) and failing to work constructively with other agencies (Duggan, 2000). An internal NPS investigation completed almost a year later also faulted the agency for its failure to implement fire management policies recommended in 1995, which other agencies, including the U.S. Forest Service were already using (Editorial Staff, 2001).

The intent of the prescribed fire clearly coincided with the stated mission of the NPS to, “conserve the scenery and the natural and historic objects and the wildlife

therein. . .” (NPS, 2003). However, the results from several investigations into the Cerro Grande fire suggest that the NPS’s implementation of the burn and some of its responses to the crisis that followed ran counter to the NPS guiding principles of “effective management” and “wise decisions” cited on its public web site (NPS, 2003).

Under the heading of effective management, NPS states that it, “requires accountability at all levels” (NPS, 2003). Nevertheless, when the final report of NPS’s board of inquiry was completed in February of 2001, it recommended no disciplinary action for anyone involved with the fire. Despite some noted “errors in judgement,” the board indicated that all personnel were acting within NPS policies (Smith, 2001). Interestingly, immediately before leaving office as a result of the 2000 Presidential election and subsequent change in administration, Secretary Babbitt called a draft of the report, “fundamentally flawed” and requested that independent fire experts take a more comprehensive look at the events surrounding the Cerro Grande Fire—a request that was apparently not heeded (Smith).

### Paying the Price

As firefighters gradually contained the fire and residents returned to their homes, the process of assessing the damage caused by the fire began. More than 16,000 victims filed claims with the Federal Emergency Management Agency before the August 2002 deadline (Propp, 2002). In addition, the government sponsored legislation to reimburse both the State of New Mexico and private insurers for their costs (Claims Magazine, 2001).

As immense as the financial costs were, the harm to National Park Service’s (NPS) reputation was also considerable. As recently as January 2003, NPS was still

feeling the repercussions of the Cerro Grande fire as Bandelier National Monument personnel, upon learning of higher than expected winds, hesitated to initiate the first prescribed burn at the facility in nearly three years. In the words of the new fire management officer, Dean Clark, NPS is paying a social penalty that requires the organization to, “bolster public confidence in our competence” (Smalling, 2003).

## DISCUSSION

Coombs’ (1999a) definition of crisis is particularly appropriate to the Cerro Grande fire, given that the fire was not only expected but, in fact, prescribed. However, no-one could have predicted how it would develop.

### Speedy and Forthcoming Information

Despite the lack of an obvious media strategy, messages about the fire were issued quickly. These messages were composed of what Coombs (1999b) calls instructing information: “instructing information has three variants: a) the what, why, when, where, and how of information about a crisis...; b) any precautionary actions stakeholders need to take...; and c) actions taken to correct the problem” (p.127). The Cerro Grande Fire Joint Information Center (CGFJIC) press notices and briefings combined with information released by the Department of Interior covered most of these variants.

This approach is important not only because affected citizens needed this information fully and quickly, but also because: “the key to successful advocacy— both public relations and legal— is effective communication...By predicting audience concerns, however, a company can explain a situation and diminish the risk of a

disgruntled shareholder or employee or other audience member filing suit” (Fitzpatrick, 1995, p.35-6).

On the other hand, once the crisis was taken out of National Park Service hands and placed within the purview of the CGFJIC, control over and consistency of the message essentially went out the window. This is a major deficiency as, “media frames refer to the success of placing the organization’s side of the story in the media” (Coombs, 1999a, p.141).

The problem was that messages seemed to be coming indiscriminately from just about anyone who could claim some connection to the fire. In one newspaper report, we counted comments from twelve different spokespeople, none of them from the NPS (Hughes, 2000). While we understand that in this case many voices wanted and needed to be heard, from local, regional, and national politicians to the various government agencies involved in the crisis abatement attempts, in our opinion it was possible and necessary for them to talk with one voice. As Coombs (1999a) says: “an organization speaking with one voice merely implies that the organization presents a consistent message. Working together, multiple spokespersons can share one voice” (p.72).

#### Matching Communication to Crisis

At first glance it might appear that the Cerro Grande Fire would fall within the natural disaster typology of crises. However, the preliminary investigation report prepared by an interagency team at the prompting of Secretary Babbitt posited that this crisis was the direct result of human breakdowns. This fact, combined with the severe environmental damage caused, meets Coombs’ (1999a) criteria for the megadamage

typology: “when an accident creates significant environmental damage.... Megadamage is caused by either technical or human breakdowns or both” (p.61).

Also according to Coombs (1999a), “organizations use... crisis communication strategies” (p.122) along with strategy continuums that define the type of response required. “The continuums reflect a range of actions from defensive to accommodative” (p.122) but, continues Coombs, “the selection of crisis communication strategies is based in part on the characteristics of the crisis situation.... A natural link between crisis communication strategies and crisis situations is crisis responsibility” (p.125-126).

In the case of the Cerro Grande fire, using Coombs’ (1999a) ‘Matching Crises and Communication Strategies’ continuum (p.124), we assert that the National Park Service (NPS) responded (almost) appropriately. There is little question that strong levels of crisis responsibility exist, and NPS’s response strategy seems to almost fit Coombs’ definition of full apology, which “is the most accommodative because it involves taking responsibility for the crisis and asking for forgiveness.... Some compensation (e.g., money or aid) can be included in the apology but is not necessary” (p.123). Coombs’ second most accommodative strategy, and therefore second most appropriate when crisis responsibility is strong, is corrective action, which “requires an organization to repair the damage created by the crisis or take action to prevent a repeat of the crisis” (p.123).

Unfortunately, we can only make assumptions about the NPS crisis communication strategy based on its apparent manifestations because evidence of its existence is hard to come by. This shortcoming was duly noted by the interagency investigation team, which found that the NPS lacked any type of provisions for handling the media when the crisis materialized. That said, the Cerro Grande Fire Joint

Information Center (CGFJIC) does seem to have had some kind of strategic plan. It generally followed the traditional public relations model described by Fitzpatrick and Shubow Rubin (1995) and fits Fearn-Banks' (1996) Public Information Model:

This model is characterized by the desire to report information journalistically... truth is essential. Most public relations practice in government agencies today falls into this category. Companies that simply distribute news releases are examples of this model. This model also involves a one-way transfer of information from the organization to the publics (p.11).

In addition the CGFJIC operated a policy of full disclosure. This is consistent with the recommendations made by Kaufmann, et al. (1994) who would suggest that the potential danger to lives and property demanded that the government adhere to such a policy of full and timely disclosure, and it did so throughout the crisis.

#### Responsibility, Corrective Action, and Compassion

We speculate that the almost immediate admission of guilt and promise of compensation (Janofsky, 2000) are what, among other things, reduced the complaints from evacuated residents and inconvenienced laboratory employees to a minimum. By doing so, the Department of Interior specifically, and the United States government more generally, achieved what Fitzpatrick (2000) calls "the overriding goal... to meet the information needs of constituents, while at the same time avoiding legal problems" (p.391).

Interestingly, beyond the commitment to pay compensation, no further immediate corrective action is apparent, and this may hurt the agencies, particularly the National Park Service (NPS), in the future. In the case of the Cerro Grande fire, it took more than

a year for the NPS to complete its official investigation and even then nobody accepted or was assigned accountability for the incident. Follow-up recommendations, if pursued, received scant attention in the press.

In addition, we found only very limited expressions of compassion in the messages delivered by the multiple officials cited in the media. It is unclear how this affected stakeholders' assessments of the NPS and the Department of Interior, but it seems particularly shortsighted given Coombs' (1999b) research indicating that "expressing concern builds credibility with victims and other stakeholders. The compassion suggests the organization is trustworthy" (p.128).

#### CONCLUSIONS/LESSONS LEARNED

We have identified both strengths and weaknesses in the National Park Service's (NPS) media communication strategy.

Evidence from our review of media and government documents suggests that information about the fire was issued quickly and fully. These message characteristics certainly match best practices in the crisis management literature and seem to have been effective in this scenario as well.

On the other hand, the NPS as an individual organization (rather than as part of the U.S. government) seemed to have all but disappeared from the scene after starting the blaze. There were no obvious attempts by any NPS spokesperson to explain what happened and why. Once a wildfire was declared and management reverted to the National Information Fire Center, the NPS seemed to relinquish all control over media

messages. Among the plethora of spokespeople, there were none who attempted to frame the story in a manner that might limit the damage to NPS's reputation.

The Cerro Grande fire falls into the 'megadamage' crisis category. It is a crisis type in which there is a strong level of organizational responsibility. As a result, using Coombs' (1999a) continuum, the NPS's application of an accommodative communication strategy is appropriate. However, they did not meet all of the requirements set out by Coombs for the full apology strategy. In particular none of the involved organizations, including NPS, asked for forgiveness. Neither did they quite meet the demands for the next strategy on Coombs' list— corrective action. While NPS did repair some of the damage by putting out the fire and issuing a thirty-day moratorium on prescribed burns, overt action to prevent a repeat of the crisis was not demonstrated.

The U.S. government's rapid acceptance of responsibility and its promises of compensation had the positive effect of dampening what might have been serious discontent among area residents.

Unfortunately no expressions of compassion from NPS (except for Superintendent Weaver after his retirement) were noted in media accounts. Compassion was also largely absent from the crisis response from higher up the government hierarchy. Although statements from the Secretary of Interior did express concern for those in harms way (residents and firefighters), these expressions were limited. This is particularly unfortunate, as the government had very little to lose by expressing compassion— having already taken responsibility and promised compensation— and so much to gain in terms of stakeholder goodwill.

Thus we believe that while the NPS did not do badly, it would have benefited even more by heeding the advice provided in crisis communication best practices. It should have had a crisis communication strategy in place which would have ensured the effective training and use of spokespeople to eliminate inconsistencies in the message and allowed the NPS to portray itself in a better light.

In addition, NPS should have asked for forgiveness, and set out more clearly its planned corrective actions. Having acknowledged responsibility for the fire and promised compensation, the U.S. government had nothing to lose and potentially much to gain by making more prodigious use of compassion. In fact, the public institutions probably had more of an obligation to apologize and express compassion as their victims here were citizens for whose well-being the government was responsible and to whom it was ultimately accountable.

We understand that politics enter the fray of government crisis management in ways that do not exist in the private sector, and that in the cases of government agencies there is a tendency, and often a requirement, for leadership to be removed from the affected organization to a hierarchically higher level. Nonetheless, it is our assertion that crisis communication best practices can and should be applied fully to government bodies as well as corporations, and that these bodies can and should be better prepared to face crises.

#### LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Chief among the limitations of this study was the lack of access to individuals directly involved in the Cerro Grande fire to ascertain whether there was or was not a

formal or even informal strategy for crisis communication with the media. Thus, it was not possible to compare actual organizational goals with the results inferred from reviewing media accounts.

As with most case studies, a weakness of this research is the inability to generalize the results to other organizations and contexts. However, Yin (1994) posits that analysts, “should try to generalize findings to ‘theory’, analogous to the way a scientist generalizes from experimental results to theory” (p.37). Further research focusing on crisis communication management in government organizations is necessary to determine whether public organizations can and/or should follow the guidance of the existing crisis management best practices or whether modified best practices are required as a result of unique relationships and responsibilities of public institutions. Studies in which researchers have access to the people and policies of the subject organization as the crisis unfolds would be particularly valuable additions to this field of inquiry.

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