CRISIS MANAGEMENT DILEMMAS: DIFFERENCES IN ATTITUDES TOWARDS REACTIVE CRISIS COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES AMONG FUTURE BUSINESS PROFESSIONALS IN CROATIA

DARKO TIPURIĆ[1], BOŽO SKOKO[2], DAMIR JUGO[3], and MARINA MEŠIN[4]

Abstract

For a corporation, a crisis is a circumstance in which it cannot function properly, which affects the organizational ability to function, prevents the achievement of goals, as well as the very survival of the organization. In this paper we analyze the process of crisis communication, characteristics of known reactive crisis communications strategies and examine if there are differences in attitudes towards reactive communication strategies among future business professional. In order to so, we use two samples of undergraduate seniors at the University of Zagreb: business school students and public relations students. Namely, in the future, business students will assume management positions in organizations of different types, while their colleagues studying public relations will be in a position to lead the communication of these organizations, with both groups mutually cooperating. To test the differences in tendencies towards certain reactive strategies we used a survey methodology where students were presented with hypothetical situations. By conduction a comparative analysis of their responses and tendencies to use specific strategies, our research results show that there are significant differences between the two groups. Students of public relations have a greater tendency to use active strategies compared to their counterparts studying business economics, who in turn display greater caution and passivity in their approaches. Based of our findings it can be concluded that both groups require further training and acquisition of practical experience to be able, at the highest level, to face, handle and successfully resolve crisis communication situations that were presented to them during the research.

Key words: crisis communication, crisis management, communication strategies, public relations, business professionals

1. CRISIS AND CRISIS MANAGEMENT

There is no single universally accepted definition of a crisis, although there is a general consensus that a crisis is an event that can harm and even destroy an entire organization (Mitroff, Pearson, Harrington, 1996, p. 7). A crisis is a disrupt, a transient difficult state in every natural, social and thought process, where lying at the very essence of a crisis is the realization that a decision on something that has yet to be decided has to be made. That is, a crisis is a decision on a state in which the old and the new are confronted; it is a decisive, or more precisely a tipping point. Crises are events that inherently carry potential damage and catastrophic effects and result in a negative public perception (Crandall, Parnell, Spillan, 2010). From a company's perspective a crisis is an unforeseen and undesired process which can substantially threaten or completely disable development capabilities of a company (Krystek, 1982, p. 14). Therefore, a crisis represents a real or a potential threat to the company, to its industry and to its stakeholders. For a corporation, a crisis is a circumstance which affects its organizational ability to functi-

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[1] Full Professor, Faculty of Economics and Business, University of Zagreb, Croatia, dtipuric@efzg.hr
[2] Assistant Professor, Faculty of Political Science, University of Zagreb, Croatia.
[3] Lecturer, Faculty of Economics and Business, University of Zagreb, Croatia.
[4] Research and Teaching Assistent, Faculty of Economics and Business, University of Zagreb, Croatia, E-mail: mmesin@efzg.hr

on, prevents the achievement of goals, as well as the very survival of the organization. Even a crisis, which, at first glance does not appear of dramatic magnitude, can have a negative impact on the image of the organization that can become so large that it threatens the company's long-term survival. (cf. Skoko, 2006, p. 244). Therefore, the main task of management is to minimize threats and provide guidance for successful crisis management (Coombs, 1999, p. 3), where factors of complexity and intensity of the environment imply different reactions from management.

Crisis management is a relatively new field of management that involves identifying the nature of a crisis, interventions in order to minimize the damage and taking actions to recover from the crisis aftermath, all with a pronounced focus on protecting its image and creating a visible impression for stakeholders that recovery is underway. Crucial areas of crisis management are: identifying a crisis, isolating the impact of a crisis, crisis communication, controlling damage caused by a crisis, preparing an assessment of recovery options, preparing a contingency plan, selecting a crisis strategy, crisis intervention, and assuming responsibility for the outcome.

Mitroff (2004, p. 10) distinguishes a key difference between crisis management and crisis leadership. Crisis management is most often reactive and recognizes a crisis once it has happened, as opposed to crisis leadership which is proactive, which attempts to identify a crisis and prepare the company for its consequences before the crisis even arises. In any case, managing communication during a crisis has become one of the most important processes of communication management. Coombs (2007, p. 3) considers appropriate crisis communication management as one of the key elements of crisis management, adding that a crisis situation is often of a perceptual nature.

Existing research show that no company is immune to crisis (Coombs 2007, p. 48), no matter how financially successful, powerful or reputable it is (Regester and Larkin 2005, p. 142). Dilenschneider (2000, p. 121) claims that no two crisis situations are identical, and emphasizes that every crisis situation has its specific causal factors, ramifications, duration, rhythm and uncertainties. This approach is supported by Kunczik (2006, p. 177), who point out that it is impossible to develop a scenario that applies equally to all corporations and crisis situations they encounter with. He emphasizes that this would presume universal knowledge of organizational and communication structures of the organization in question, as well as local and regional conditions in which they operate. Kunczik concludes that it is only possible to prepare general instructions on how to act in crisis situations, which can serve as a framework for a communication strategy focused on consensus, which must be adapted according to individual viewpoints.

Tomić (2008, p. 363) states that causes of crisis situations can be divided into internal and external. *External causes,* as the name itself suggests, appear outside of the organization, and it is considered that the corporation does not have a significant influence over them. External causes include natural disasters and accidents, political and social changes, economic crises, recessions, market changes, security environment, etc. On the other hand, *internal causes* often imply crisis situations that are not visible outside of corporations. Internal causes include poor work organization, strained interpersonal relationships, incompetence and immorality of management, corruption, negative rivalry, lack of corporate culture, poor working conditions, unrealistic union goals, lack of communication, etc. Luecke (2005, p. 24) summarizes the causes of a crisis, stressing that the possible causes of a crisis can be described in the following five categories: *accidents and natural disasters*, *crises related to health and the environment*, *technological incidents, economic and market forces* , and *out of control employees.* Cutlip et al (2003, p. 389) point out that, in addition to the cause, it is extremely important to recognize the type of a crisis, in order to prepare an adequate response, which depends on the type and duration of possible scenarios.

Seymour and Moore (2000, p. 10) provide a very vivid classification of crisis situation types, who compare crisis situations with snakes. A *cobra crisis* is a disaster that happens to a corporation suddenly, it catches it off guard, leading to a crisis with very little time to react. On the other hand, a *python crisis* implies a crisis driven by a slower burning issue, i.e. a crisis that represents a set of problems that paralyze a corporation one after another, slowly destroying it to pieces.

2. MANAGEMENT ASPECTS OF COMMUNICATION IN CRISIS CONDITIONS

There are various definitions of crisis communication. Fearn-Banks (2001, p. 480) defines crisis communication management as a strategic planning process whose goal is to anticipate crisis situations and to react properly during a crisis situation, or in a situation of negative events, a process that eliminates part of the risk and uncertainty and allows the organization to effectively manage its destiny at the same time.

Analyzing the life cycle of a crisis situation, Fearn-Banks (2001) distinguishes five phases of development of a crisis situation. The first is *detection* in which a corporation notes the warning signs, the second is *preparation or prevention* in which the warning signs are noted and proactive and reactive plans are prepared to deal with the situation, the third is *containment* , i.e. taking steps to limit the duration of the crisis or its effects, the fourth is *recovery* where the corporation attempts to return to "business as usual" state, and the fifth phase is *learning* in which the organization considers what happened and assesses the negative or positive effects for the future (Langford, 2009, p. 434).

Many authors stress out a need for a systematic approach to crisis situations by preparing contingency plans to prepare the organization's leadership for the challenges that will arise when a crisis occurs. Sam Black (2009) points to several elements that should be incorporated into a possible crisis plan. An *analysis of possible crisis causes* prescribes that it is necessary to anticipate possible difficulties, whether they are of an external or internal nature. Often it is impossible to predict every possible crisis. *Preparing a communications plan* should include planning communication before the crisis, communication during the crisis and crisis communication after the crisis. *Selection of staff* means identifying individuals who would be available at the time when the crisis emerges. *Communication capacity* implies the technical elements of communication, in order to prevent a communication blockage in the middle of a crisis. *Training* means educating individuals who will be involved in the crisis situation, in order to make sure that they are familiar with their obligations when a crisis breaks out. Finally, *simulating a crisis situation* is the last element of crisis planning that should be tried out prior to an actual use, which will provide an answer on how staff will respond in a crisis situation.

Of significant importance for the outcome of a crisis situation is the manner in which the corporation communicates with the media. As a communication channel towards the vast majority of stakeholders, it is necessarily that the media is approached carefully, respecting all their idiosyncrasies. The media, therefore, in crisis situations must be provided with timely information, because the corporation will, by doing so, provide the right image to the public and remain credible. Also, it is necessary to designate a person which will be responsible for the communication with journalists, providing them information, thus providing a uniform transmission of information. And in the event of a large-scale crisis, when a much greater availability of information is required, it is necessary to establish a communications center. Namely, a crisis attracts the media because it is perceived by journalists as a "good story" and if timely information is not provided, it is highly likely that they will be led by gossip, rumors, and partial information. For many corporations and the managers leading them, especially when they find themselves in a crisis situation for the first time, the attention of the media and the public that they are exposed to creates extensive pressure, which they are not capable of handling well. Crises always come when they are least expected and corporations almost always, without exception, await them insufficiently prepared.

3. REACTIVE CRISIS COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES

In cases when a corporation is already facing certain allegations or critiques, or in cases when problems are already present, managers are put into a position to act reactively. Situations like these, corporations tend to achieve public's understanding, keep and restore a positive image, and to rebuild trust and support (Smith, 2009, 115). Smith also points out three approaches relevant for drafting communications responses in negative situations. *Apologia* is a formal defense through which an organization explains its actions and positions in a negative situation.

Jugo (2012, p. 186) quotes Smith who notes that it is important not to confuse *apologia* with apology which is an expression of fault and remorse. An apologia could include an apology, but it is much more than that. *Theory of accounts* refers to the use of communication to manage relationships in the wake of rebuke or strong criticism. The third approach is the *image restoration theory* that is based on the presumption that, in the face of criticism, both people and organizations seek to maintain or rebuild a positive reputation.

Looking in general, Smith (2009, p. 117) differentiates seven different groups of reactive communication strategies. *Pre-emptive actions* are taken before the opposition launches its first charge against the organization. *Offensive response strategies* are based on a premise that the organization is operating from a position of strength in face of the opposition. This group incorporates four different strategies: (a) *attack* strategy that claims that an accusation of wrongdoing is an attempt to impugn the organization's reputation by an accuser who is negligent or malicious, (b) *embarrassment* in which an organization tries to lessen an opponent's influence by using shame, humiliation or other incriminating information, (c) *shock* as a deliberate agitation of the mind or emotions, particular through use of surprise, disgust, or some other strong and unexpected stimulus and (d) *threat* that involves the promise that harm will come to the accuser or the purveyor of bad news. Hereby, Heath (2001, p. 505) quotes Benoit who states that corporations, to use this group of strategies, have to be perfectly clear of any responsibility related to opposition's allegations or problem they are in.

Defensive response is a group of strategies describes by Smith (2009, p. 119) as less aggressive response to opposition's critique. It contains three different approaches: (a) *denial* where no blame is accepted claiming that the reputed problem doesn't exist or didn't occur, (b) *excuse* in which an organization tries to minimize its responsibility for the harm of wrongdoing, (c) *justification* which admits the organization did the deed but did so for a good reason. Related to this group of strategies, Heath (2001, p. 505) quotes Bradford and Garrett who state that using these strategies doesn't come without problems stating that individuals will not believe organization's statements without proof presented by a third, independent party.

Diversionary response strategies are four reactive strategies whose intention is to shift the gaze of the public from the problem associated with the organization: (a) *concession* when an organization tries to rebuild its relationship with its public by giving the public something it wants, (b) *ingratiation* as a strategy of rather questionable ethical standing when an organization tries to manage the negative situation by charming its publics giving them something of relatively little significance although it is presented as something of crucial importance , (c) *disassociation* which attempts to distance an organization from the wrongdoing associated with it and (d) *relabeling* when an organization refers to a problem with a new name which is more acceptable in the public than real, negative label (Smith, 2009, p. 123).

Vocal commiseration strategies are a family of four strategies that Smith (2009, p. 124) describes as ones in which the organization expresses empathy and understanding about the misfortune suffered by its publics: (a) *concern* through which the organization expresses that it is not indifferent to a problem, without admitting guilt, (b) *condolence* in which the organization expresses grief over someone's loss or misfortune, again without admitting guilt, (c) *regret* which involves admitting sorrow and remorse for a situation with a wish that an event had not happened, and finally (d) *apology* which involves publicly accepting full responsibility and asking forgiveness.

In this respect, Heath (2001, p. 507) quotes Tavuchis who points out a difference between corporate apologies and apologies given by individuals. Corporate apologies do not remove attention from the incident and the incident is most likely not forgotten as the case is with individual's apology. On the contrary, when a corporation issues an apology, it puts additional accent on that particular incident.

Rectifying behavior strategies are five strategies in which, according to Smith (2009, p. 130) an organization does something to repair the damage done to its publics*: (a) *investigation* when an organization promises to examine the situation and then to act as the facts warrant, (b) *corrective action* which involves taking steps to contain a problem, repair the damage, and/or pre-

vent its recurrence, (c) *restitution* which involves making amends by compensating victims or res-
toring a situation to its earlier condition and finally (d) *repentance* which involves both a change
of heart and change in action. Heath (2001, p. 505) adds that corrective strategies are best to
combine with apologia strategies and quotes Benoit (1995) and Hearit (1995) who state that this
combination is the best if the corporation is to convince their customers that a possibility of spe-
cific problem happening again is limited to a minimum.

The last group of reactive strategies according to Smith (2009, p. 131) is *deliberate inaction.*
This is a group of two strategies that both include not to comment the situation or the problem:
(a) *strategic silence* that implies patience and composure which can shorten the life cycle of
unpleasant situation, but it is not to be confused with the "no comment" statement that is
immediately perceived as guilt accepting answer and (b) *strategic ambiguity,* the organization's
refusal to be pinned down to a one particular response.

4. EXAMINATION OF TENCENCIES TOWARDS THE USE OF REACTIVE STRATEGIES
AMONG FUTURE BUSINESS PROFESSIONALS IN CROATIA

In order to examine the perception and position towards reactive communication strategies,
and to test for differences in the attitudes towards the named strategies among future business
professional, we conducted a qualitative research among the undergraduate seniors (students in
their final year of undergraduate studies) at the University of Zagreb. We selected two populati-
ons of undergraduate students: business school students and public relations students. The rea-
son the selection of the these two groups is that, in the future, business students will assume
management positions in organizations of different types, while their colleagues studying public
relations will be in a position to lead the communication of these organizations, with both groups
mutually cooperating.

The research was done by survey methodology which resulted in 165 respondents, out of
which 129 are business school students from the Faculty of Economics and Business and 36 are
public relations students from the Faculty of Political Science

The survey questionnaire consisted of a total of seven questions, each of which represented
one group of reactive strategies, presented through the simulation of a crisis situation, and for
which the students were asked to select one of the strategies among the offered answers that
they would undertake if faced with such a situation. The difference in answers between the busi-
ness school students and public relations students was tested using the z-test for differences in
proportions in two independent samples.

Table 1: Differences in tendency to select strategies from the *pre-emptive actions* group among busi-
ness students and students of public relations

	Public relations students (n=36)		Business students (n=129)		z-test
	Total	%	Total	%	
Denial and legal reaction	5	13,9	66	51,2	3,9939***
Completely ignore problem	2	5,5	3	2,4	-0,9996
Pre-emptive response	29	80,6	51	39,5	-4,3544***
Admittance and self-punishment	0	0	9	6,9	1,6299
Total	36	100	129	100	

*p<0,1; **p<0,05; ***p<0,01

Analyzing the *pre-emptive actions* strategies that imply the moment immediately before the
other side has begun an attack on the organization, students were presented with the following
hypothetical situation: "*Media following your corporation have learned of your CEO's extramarital
affair. A reporter has made you aware of this information, and has mentioned that the news will
be released in three days*". When deciding on the strategy that will be used, there is a visible dif-
ference between business students and students of public relations. Namely, 51.2% of business

students chose the passive option, where they would wait for the publication of negative informa-tion and then utilize all legislative and legal options available to them; placing denials and initia-ting available legal measures. On the other hand, this strategy would be chosen by only 13.9% of public relations students. This difference in preference for selecting a strategy of denial and legal reaction between business students and students of public relations is also statistically signifi-cant (z=3,9939; p<0,01). On the other hand, an astounding 80.6% of public relations students selected the strategy of *pre-emptive response,* the most active in the group of strategies that implies placing public justification for a certain procedure before the other side has even made their opinion public, while 39.5% of business students chose this strategy. The observed differen-ce between the two groups of students is significant (z=-4,3544; p<0,01). The remaining two pos-sibilities in this scenario, completely ignoring the problem and admitting and self-punishment, was selected by a considerably smaller number of respondents.

Examining the tendency to use strategies from the second, *offensive responses*, group, which are undertaken so that the organization could await an attack from a much stronger posi-tion, the respondents were described the following hypothetical situation: *"Your company has come into the spotlight after the media reported that your biggest client is the State (90% of revenues come from the State), and that the company is favored compared to other companies in the same sector".* In selecting the individual strategies to undertake in this situation, there is also a noticeable difference in the preferences of the two groups of students. In this situation, 39.5% of business students have selected the most passive of available strategies, *threaten opponents*, while the same strategy was chosen by half as many of their peers studying public relations, only 22.2% of them, and this difference is statistically significant at a 10% level (z=1,9163; p<0,1). On the other hand, 36.1% of public relations students selected the *embarrassment* strategy, i.e. the strategy by which they would try to reduce an opponent's influence by making public incrimina-ting information about it. As a comparison, this strategy would be selected by only 17.1% of busi-ness students, which shows that public relations students are more inclined to a more active approach in resolving communications problems compared to business students, and the stated difference in the tendency to select this strategy among the two groups of students is statistically significant (z=-2,4731; p<0,05). The second choice for students of public relations is the *shock* strategy, selected by 30.6% of them, which once again confirms that public relations students are more inclined to select more active and dynamic strategies.

Table 2: Differences in tendency to select strategies from the *offensive responses* group between business students and students of public relations.

	Public relations students (n=36)		Business students (n=129)		z-test
	Total	%	Total	%	
Attack on opponent	4	11,1	27	20,9	1,3336
Embarrassing the opponent	13	36,1	22	17,1	-2,4731**
Shocking the opponent	11	30,6	29	22,5	-0,9996
Threat to all opponents	8	22,2	51	39,5	1,9163*
Total	36	100	129	100	

*p<0,1; **p<0,05; ***p<0,01

When analyzing the third group of strategies, *defensive responses*, which imply a less aggressive response to external criticism, respondents were presented with the following hypothetical situation: *"Your company is a food producer and is in the spotlight because of a fin-ding by inspectors that one of your products contains more than 1% of allowed GMO ingredients. All the media have reported this information and have been brutally attacking the company for three consecutive days".* Expounding on the strategies that they would use in this situation, both business students (74.4%) and students of public relations (77.8%) dominantly decided on the *excuse* strategy, by which, on behalf of the organization, they tried to minimize responsibility for the harm or wrongdoing. By choosing this strategy, students would, on behalf of the organization,

significantly shorten the duration of the crisis situation, thereby reducing potential long-term negative impacts due to media coverage of the organization in an obviously negative context. The second most preferred strategy for both groups was the *justification* strategy, by which the organization recognized fault for the event, however, emphasizing that there was a valid and legitimate reason. Opting for *justification* was a total of 20.9% of business students, and 22.2% of students of public relations, while only a negligible number of respondents opted for the remaining two options, *denial* and complete *ignoring* of the situation. Analyzing the responses to this question and the hypothetical situation, we did not find a statistically significant difference in the tendency to select specific strategies from the defense response group between business students and students of public relations.

Table 3: Differences in tendency to select strategies from the *defensive response* group between business students and students of public relations.

	Public relations students (n=36)		Business students (n=129)		z-test
	Total	%	Total	%	
Denial	0	0	4	3,1	1,0696
Justification	8	22,2	27	20,9	-0,1677
Excuse	28	77,8	96	74,5	-0,4124
Ignoring	0	0	2	1,5	0,7517
Total	36	100	129	100	

*p<0,1; **p<0,05; ***p<0,01

The group of strategies called *diversionary response strategies*, whose goal is to divert attention from the connection of the company to the stated problem was tested on respondents with the following scenario: *"You work in a large national television company, and a regular commentator has offended one of the underprivileged social groups with an inappropriate comment in the television program. All media, non-governmental organizations and institutions are publicly criticizing you"*. Stating their opinions on this strategy, both groups once again answered very similarly, and in all of given strategies we did not find statistically significant differences among the two student groups. More than half of business students, 69.8% of them, as well as students of public relations, 61.1% of them, selected the *disassociation* strategy, where organizations attempt to distance themselves from negative aspects they are being linked to, especially in cases when the accident occurs due to a failure to comply to the organization's policies and regular patterns of behavior. This strategy too, as well as the one predominantly selected in the previous question, was chosen to significantly shorten the lifespan of the crisis situation, which shows a tendency in both groups of students to seek the quickest way to resolve the problem in the public, which would in all likelihood continue to occur within the organization's system. The second preferred strategy, also for both groups, in this case was the strategy of *relabeling,* by which a problem that would appear would be named something differently, that is, much more acceptable to the target audiences than the real problem. The remaining two strategies, *concessions* and *ingratiations*, were chosen by less than 10% of respondents in both groups.

Table 3: Differences in tendency to select strategies from the *diversionary response* group between business students and students of public relations

	Public relations students (n=36)		Business students (n=129)		z-test
	Total	%	Total	%	
Concession	4	11,1	7	5,4	-1,2090
Ingratiation	3	8,4	8	6,2	-0,4534
Disassociation	22	61,1	90	69,8	0,9835
Relabeling	7	19,4	24	16,6	-0,1141
Total	36	100	129	100	

*p<0,1; **p<0,05; ***p<0,01

Researching the use of strategies from the *rectifying behavior* group, respondents were presented with the following hypothetical situation: "*Your company, a large mobile telecommunications operator owned by the State, due to a mistake in its own system, has left customers for three days without a mobile signal, which was finally reestablished after media criticism and pressure from angry customers. The company has already suffered obvious damage".* Analyzing the answers of the respondents, we determined significant differences in the tendency to certain strategies from this group of reactive strategies between business students and students of public relations. 94.4% of public relations students chose the *restitution* strategy, which involves making amends by compensating victims or restoring a situation to its earlier condition. By selecting this strategy, students would, prior to a likely investigation and its possible negative consequences, beforehand reduce the damage to the organization. On the other hand, only a little over half of business students, 62.7% of them, opted for the *restitution,* strategy. The observed difference between the two groups of students is statistically significant ($z=-3,6541$; $p<0,01$). Furthermore, there is a significant difference ($z=2,5914$; $p<0,01$) in the tendency to select the *corrective action* strategy, which was not selected by any of public relations students, as opposed to 16.3% of business students, and the tendency to select the strategy of *repentance* ($z=2,1868$; $p<0,05$), which was selected by 17.1% of business students, and only 2,7% of public relations students.

Table 5: Differences in tendency to select strategies from the *rectifying behavior* group between business students and students of public relations

	Public relations students (n=36)		Business students (n=129)		z-test
	Total	%	Total	%	
Investigation	1	2,7	5	3,9	0,3112
Corrective action	0	0	21	16,3	2,5914***
Restitution	34	94,4	81	62,7	-3,6541***
Repentance	1	2,7	22	17,1	2,1868**
Total	36	100	129	100	

*p<0,1; **p<0,05; ***p<0,01

The tendency to use reactive strategies from the *vocal commiseration* group, in which organizations express empathy and understanding for the misfortune that their target audiences have experienced, was analyzed by presenting respondents with the following hypothetical situation: "*A group of children that was celebrating a birthday in one of your fast food restaurants ended up in the hospital due to food poisoning. Although it has not been confirmed that the food poisoning was caused by your food, the media are largely indirectly creating an image that it is your company that is responsible for the situation. At that moment, it is still unknown whether or not you are really responsible, while the guilty party will be known only in about 10 days when the results of the toxicological analysis of the food in your restaurant are known".* A large number of students of public relations (66.7%) selected the *regret* strategy, which involves admitting sorrow and remorse for a situation, with a wish that an event had not happened, while 45% of business students choose for this strategy. The greater tendency of public relations students to the regret strategy compared to business students is statistically significant ($z= -2,3031$; $p<0,05$). Regret does not imply recognition of one's own guilt, in fact, sometimes it can emphasize the refusal to accept guilt. When looking at the remaining strategies offered in this group, *apology* by which acceptance of responsibility is admitted, and *condolence,* a somewhat more formal strategy, but without accepting guilt of the organization itself, we have not found statistically significant differences between business students and students of public relations. The least number from both groups of respondents selected the most passive option, the strategy of *expressing concern.*

Table 6: Differences in tendency to select strategies from the *vocal commiseration*
group between business students and students of public relations

	Public relations students (n=36)		Business students (n=129)		z-test
	Total	%	Total	%	
Concern	2	5,6	18	14,0	1,3651
Condolence	5	13,9	25	19,4	0,75528
Regret	24	66,7	58	45,0	-2,3031**
Apology	5	13,9	28	21,7	1,0367
Total	36	100	129	100	

*p<0,1; **p<0,05; ***p<0,01

Considering the tendency towards using the last group of reactive strategies of crisis communication, *deliberate inaction*, by which organizations do not provide significant comments to criticism or attacks aimed at them, respondents were faced with the following hypothetical situation: *"You are managing a sports team that has just beaten its greatest rival in a crucial game. A questionable decision by the referee that went in your favor occurred during the game, and it was not caught by the official camera. Your opponent is applying media pressure in order to justify the poor result, announcing a press conference for the next day that will generate a great deal of media interest that is unfavorable for you. You, nevertheless, find your own video recording of the situation under question, which proves that you are right".* Students of public relations, an astounding 77.8%, dominantly selected *strategic silence* as the approach suitable for resolving this situation. This strategy implies not responding to criticism, which shortens its "lifespan" and, after some time, closing the story with your own arguments by which you completely refute the other side's arguments. On the other hand, only 43.4% of business students opted for this strategy, and the stated difference in the tendency to select this strategy between the two groups is statistically significant (z= -3,6471; p<0,01). There is also a statistically significant difference in the tendency to choose the strategy of *completely ignoring* this situation (z=2,2987; p<0,05): only 5.6% of public relations students selected the stated strategy as opposed to 22.5% of business students. A statistical difference has been determined also in the tendency to select the *strategic ambiguity* (z=1,9426, p<0,1) strategy, which was selected by only 2.7% of public relations students compared to 14.7% of business students. A significant difference was not determined concerning the selection of *direct confrontation*.

Table 7: Differences in tendency to select strategies from the *deliberate inaction*
group among business students and students of public relations

	Public relations students (n=36)		Business students (n=129)		z-test
	Total	%	Total	%	
Direct confrontation	5	13,9	25	19,4	0,7553
Completely ignore	2	5,6	29	22,5	2,2987**
Strategic silence	28	77,8	56	43,4	-3,6471***
Strategic ambiguity	1	2,7	19	14,7	1,9426*
Total	36	100	129	100	

*p<0,1; **p<0,05; ***p<0,01

5. CONCLUSION

Crisis communication management and the use of reactive crisis communication strategies certainly represent one of the most challenging segments of public relations in organizations. Communicating during a crisis carries a great deal of stress and insecurity which, with insufficient experience in facing such situations, brings a whole range of challenges in terms of communica-

tion and management. In addition to the principles of crisis communication, in this paper we sought to encompass and analyze available reactive crisis communications strategies that the organizations and the professionals managing communications have at their disposal.

In this study we analyzed the attitudes toward different reactive communication strategies of future business professionals. Business students will likely be in a position to manage entire systems and organizations and will be faced with crisis situations during their working lives. On the other hand, public relations students will likely during their careers manage communications in large systems, organizations and corporations. Both groups of future business professionals will find themselves in situations where they must mutually cooperate to resolve crisis situations. Generally, it is possible to conclude that, in a situation when they are presented with the imperative of making decisions on procedures in a crisis situation there are significant differences in the approach among the two groups of students when choosing strategies for dealing with crisis situations. Business students, to a greater extent, chose more passive strategies and also strategies that are less risky compared to students of public relations. On the other hand, students of public relations in general mostly opted for strategies that carry proactive features and additional risk, not waiting for certain negative information to become publicly available, in order to then set out to resolve the situation. A significant difference was also noticed in the situation when the organization is being criticized for being favored, in which business students again, almost twice as many compared to their public relations peers, selected the most passive of the proposed strategies, while the public relations student swere in turn much more inclined to select a significantly more active approach by which the opponent would be embarrassed or the public shocked.

The least difference between the two groups of students was observed in situations where the organization was faced with a crisis due to an error in its own system for which it was forced to divert attention from its own problems and when it is unquestionably responsible for the resulting situation. The highest preference in this situation, shown by both groups of students, was toward approaches that would minimize the responsibility for the situation and thus to a greater extent as possible try to reduce the duration of the problematic situation. However, in situations when the organization is threatened with long and arduous litigation, students of public relations reported significantly greater preference for the selection of a "middle ground" strategy that would solve the problem before litigation, recognizing responsibility for failure and compensation for damages to all injured parties. On the other hand, business students would choose this approach to a much lesser extent, and unlike their counterparts from the public relations study program, would significantly earlier decide for the other two extreme possibilities, that of a full recognition of responsibility and rectifying behaviors to a much lesser extent than the other options. Finally, in situations where they must choose one of the strategies when the organization is suffering criticism that is unjustified, public relations students have opted for the most risky, but the approach with the greatest potential benefit for the organization, while this approach is chosen much less by business students. On the other hand, as opposed to public relations students, they decided on the least risky strategy of ignoring the situation, which would, however, not bring any positive effects to the organization itself.

When analyzing the results of the research, it is necessary to take into account that both groups of respondents who participated in this study do not have significant practical experience and that this test can serve as a roadmap for their further education and training in the field of crisis management. In order for participants in the study to be able to face, in the best way possible and according to good business practices, real crisis situations similar to those that were presented to them in this study, their further education and gaining of practical experience is essential.

With this research and the obtained results we hope that they will serve as a quality foundation for adjusting and improving the curricula in business schools and political science as well as related disciplines, and also that the findings of this paper will help motivate future business professionals for further training in this area.

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