

**COMM 785 - Advanced Crisis Communication in Public Relations – 3 Credits**

Time: 3:00-5:30 Monday, plus hours arranged\*

Room: 340 Minard Annex

**Instructor:** Dr. Timothy L. Sellnow

**Phone:** 231-7632 (office) 235-1700 (home) **E-mail:** [tim.sellnow@ndsu.nodak.edu](mailto:tim.sellnow@ndsu.nodak.edu)

**Office:** 321E Minard Hall

**Office Hours:** 11:00-12:00 Mondays, Tuesdays, and Fridays; or by appt.

**Readings**

A reading packet is available at the Copy Center in the NDSU Memorial Union. The journal articles and chapters that are included are listed on the weekly schedule. There will also be extensive reading related to the two case studies.

Reynolds, B. (2002). *Crisis and emergency risk communication*. Atlanta, GA: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Seeger, M. W., Sellnow, T. L., & Ulmer, R. R. (2003). *Communication and organizational crisis*. Westport, CT: Praeger.

Weik, K. E., & Sutcliffe, K. M. (2001). *Managing the unexpected*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

**Course Description**

Catalogue Description: Long term and short term issues for managing communication related to organizational crises are discussed in the stages of pre-crisis, crisis, and post-crisis.

Extended Description: This course follows the crisis communication management process through the stages of pre-crisis, crisis, and post-crisis. The pre-crisis stage discusses planning and environmental scanning. The crisis stage discusses communication strategies for image restoration. The post-crisis stage depicts crisis as an opportunity for organizational learning and for rebuilding or expanding public trust. The course uses a case study approach throughout.

\*The hours arranged involve two field trips on weeks thirteen and fourteen. We will visit two Emergency Operations Centers during class on these weeks. The visits may require a change in our class time. If you are unable to attend the field trip, you will be given a reasonable reading assignment related to the facility we visit.

**Assignments**

Reaction Papers (8 @ 10 points each)	80 points
Pre-Crisis Case Assessment Position Paper	50 points
Crisis Assessment Position Paper	50 points
Final Paper	<u>100 points</u>
<b>Total</b>	<b>280 points</b>

**Grading**

Final grades will be assigned according to the following scale: A = 92%, B = 85%, C = 75 %, D = 68%

**Description of Assignments**

Reaction Papers

Students receive a question based on the reading assignment for each lecture/discussion week. Students are required to write answers to the questions for the next week’s class. Answers should not exceed 500 words. These answers are discussed in class. Students receive up to 10 points for each weekly assignment.

Position Papers

The class will take a case study approach by tracing at least two crises from their inception to the present throughout the semester. You will be required to write two position papers, not more than 3000 words in length, related to one of these crises. One position paper will be written at the conclusion of the unit focusing on pre-crisis. The second position paper will be written following the unit focusing on crisis.

Final Paper

The final paper should analyze some aspect of a crisis by applying an extended review of a specific element of the crisis communication literature to a crisis situation. Students are not limited to the cases covered in class. This paper should take the form of a conference paper or journal article. Papers must include research questions, a rationale, designation of a data set, a review of literature that articulates a methodological stance, an analysis section, and a discussion of implications. The paper may not exceed 6,000 words.

**Policies for the Course:**

Any students who need special accommodations for learning or who have special needs are invited to share these concerns or requests with the instructor as soon as possible.

Attendance: Students are expected to attend all class sessions. Participation is a critical element in any communication course. Moreover, students who choose not to attend the lectures tend to have a more difficult time completing their assignments than do those students who attend regularly. Whenever possible, the instructor should be notified in advance if students must miss class.

Participation: Students are encouraged to participate in all lectures/discussions. When students share their experiences with the class, the course material often becomes more interesting and comprehensible.

Assignment Descriptions: Students will receive a detailed outline of all assignments at least one week before they are due.

Private Meetings: Students are highly encouraged to interact with the instructor outside of class. A few minutes with the instructor can often eliminate confusion or anxiety concerning an assignment. Students unable to meet with the instructor during office hours are encouraged to make appointments at other times.

Late Work: All assignments are due on time. “Make-up” assignments will be allowed only if a compelling excuse is offered. If a compelling excuse is not offered, the instructor will allow the student to complete a version of the assignment for a 10% reduction in total points. Students who fail to turn in position papers on time without a compelling excuse will have no makeup opportunities.

Academic Dishonesty/Plagiarism: All work in this course must be completed in a manner consistent with NDSU University Senate Policy, Section 335: Code of Academic Responsibility and Conduct. <http://www.ndsu.nodak.edu/policy/335.htm>

## TENTATIVE WEEKLY SCHEDULE

Please have all readings completed by the date under which they are listed.

### *INTRODUCTION*

#### **WEEK ONE**

**“Be first. Be right. Be credible.”: Understanding the Communication Constraints of the CDC Maxim.**

Seeger, M. W., Sellnow, T. L., & Ulmer, R. R. (1998). Communication, organization and crisis. In M. E. Roloff (Ed.), *Communication Yearbook* (Vol. 21, pp. 231-275). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

#### **WEEK TWO**

**Circumscribing Crisis Communication: Toward a Dominant Theory of Crisis Communication**

Heath, R. L., & Millar, D. P. (2004). A rhetorical approach to crisis communication : Management, communication processes, and strategic responses, In D. P. Millar, & Heath, R. L. (Eds.), *Responding to crisis: A rhetorical approach to crisis communication* (pp. 1-18).

Schultz, P. D. & Seeger, M. W. (1990). Corporate centered apologia: Iacocca in defense of Chrysler. *Speaker and Gavel*, 28, 50-60.

Ware, B. L. & Linkugel, W. A. (1973). They spoke in defense of themselves: On the generic criticism of apologia. *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 59, 273-283.

Texts: Reynolds, Modules 1-2; Seeger, Chapters 1-4

Reaction Paper Question: What are the linkages among rhetoric, sensemaking, chaos, and organizational learning?

### ***PRE-CRISIS: BE FIRST***

#### **WEEK THREE**

**Risk Communication: Knowing the Stakes and the Stakeholders**

Hearit, K. M. (1995). “Mistakes were made”: Organizations, apologia, and crises of social legitimacy. *Communication Studies*, 46, 1-17.

Metzler, M. (2001). The centrality of organizational legitimacy to public relations practice. In R. L. Heath (Ed.), *Handbook of public relations* 321-334. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Ulmer, R. R. (2001). Effective crisis management through established stakeholder relationships: Malden Mills as a case study. *Management Communication Quarterly*, 14(4), 590-615.

Texts: Reynolds Modules 3, 7; Seeger, Chapters 5, 6, 11

Reaction Paper Question: To what extent are stakeholder satisfaction and organizational legitimacy compatible?

## **WEEK FOUR**

### **The Ideal Pre-Crisis Plan: Creating High Reliability Organizations**

Texts: Reynolds, Module 4; Seeger, Chapter 9; Weick, Chapters 1-6

Reaction Paper Question: To what extent can the elements of a high reliability culture truly be imposed upon a crisis plan?

## **WEEK FIVE**

Presentation of Pre-Crisis Case Assessment Position Papers

### ***CRISIS: BE RIGHT***

## **WEEK SIX**

### **Crisis as Chaos**

Murphy, P. (1996). Chaos theory as a model for managing issues and crises, *Public Relations Review*, 22, 95-113.

Weick, K. (1993). The collapse of sensemaking in organizations: The Mann Gulch disaster, *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 38, 628-652.

Sellnow, T. L., Seeger, M. W., & Ulmer, R. R. (2002). Chaos theory, informational needs, and natural disasters. *Journal of Applied Communication Research*, 30, 269-292.

Text: Seeger, Chapter 7

Reaction Paper Questions: Do you agree that crises are chaotic. If so, what good is crisis planning? If not chaotic, what are they?

## **WEEK SEVEN**

### **The Case for Strategic Ambiguity**

Ulmer, R. R., & Sellnow, T. L. (2000). Consistent questions of ambiguity in organizational crisis communication: Jack in the Box as a case study. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 25, 143-155.

Ulmer, R. R., & Sellnow, T. L. (1997). Strategic ambiguity and the ethic of significant choice in the tobacco industry's crisis communication. *Communication Studies*, 48, 215-233.

Texts: Reynolds, Modules 5, 6, 8; Seeger, Chapters 10, 12, 13

Reaction Paper Questions: To what extent are spokespersons ethical when they engage in strategic ambiguity?

## **WEEK EIGHT**

### **Crisis Communication as Image Restoration**

*Denial, Evading Responsibility, and Reducing Offensiveness of the Act*

Benoit, W. L. (1997). Image repair discourse and crisis communication. *Communication Studies*, 23, 177-186.

Brinson, S. L. & Benoit, W. L. (1996). Attempting to restore a public image: Dow Corning and the breast implant crisis. *Communication Quarterly*, 44, 29-41.

*Separation, Corrective Action and Mortification, or Recompense*

Cowden, K., & Sellnow, T. L. (2002). Issues advertising as crisis communication: Northwest Airline's use of image restoration during the 1998 pilots' strike. *Journal of Business Communication*, 39, 194-221.

Sellnow, T. L., Ulmer, R. R., & Snider, M. (1998). The compatibility of corrective action in organizational crisis communication. *Communication Quarterly*, 46, 60-74.

Text: none

Reaction Paper Questions: To what extent are the image restoration categories intertwined?

## **WEEK NINE**

Presentation of Crisis Assessment Position Papers

***POST-CRISIS: BE CREDIBLE***

**WEEK TEN**

**Organizational Crises as Epistemic and/or Epideictic**

Sitkin, S. B. (1996). Learning through failure: The strategy of small losses. In M. D. Cohen, & L. S. Sproull (Eds.), *Organizational learning*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Weick, K. E. (2001). *Making sense of the organization* (pp. 361-379). Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers Inc.

Text: Seeger, Chapter 8

Reaction Paper Question: To what extent do you believe that engaging in ceremonial remembrance of a crisis is or is not helpful to the organizational learning process?

**WEEK ELEVEN**

**Post-Crisis Communication as Virtue**

Baker, G. F. (2001). Race and reputation: Restoring image beyond the crisis. In R. L. Heath, & G. Vasquez (Eds.), *Handbook of Public Relations* (pp. 513-520). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.

Seeger, M. W., & Ulmer, R. R. (2001). Virtuous responses to organizational crisis: Aaron Feuerstein and Milt Cole. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 31, 369-376.

Text: Seeger, Chapter 14

Reaction Paper Question: To what extent can a crisis actually be a good thing for a company?

**WEEK TWELVE**

Presentation of Post-Crisis Position Papers.

**WEEK THIRTEEN**

EOC Filed Trip

**WEEK FOURTEEN**

EOC Field Trip

**WEEK FIFTEEN**

Half of students present final papers

**FINAL EXAMINATION WEEK**

Remaining half of students present final papers