

Insights on the Influence of the Attributes of the Arab Culture on Crisis Communications

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Abstract: An organization's image and reputation are assets that are built up over time. Organizations seek to develop and maintain positive images in the minds of publics. The image of an organization can be threatened by crises, and this impacts the trust it has with its employees and customers. Trust declines when employees feel they are not informed properly, especially in times of crises when it is imperative to respond to the threat and where promptness is necessary. Communications help build or restore some level of trust. The case is also applicable on a social level where governments and the public should communicate effectively especially during crises.

Two main issues will be discussed in this paper: First, the influence of culture on the practice of Crisis Communications (CC); and second, the factors that underpin the role of culture in CC. These issues are significant since they represent the characteristics and influence of the Arab culture in particular. This article contributes to the understanding of the significance of culture in CC for organizations operating in the Arab World.

Keywords: Culture, reputation, standardization, crisis communications, organizations, crisis messages, Arab World.

INTRODUCTION

Culture is central to the functioning of any organization and has the potential to influence almost every aspect of organizational activity [1,2]. The organizational culture can also hinder or facilitate the practice of crisis management [3-5].

Few studies have investigated the characteristics and influence of the Arab culture on the effectiveness of CC taking into consideration that the Arab World is a region that has its own cultural identity which is different from that of the West [6,7].

In recent years, the entire Arab region has witnessed unprecedented political, social and economic crises. There has been a noticeable deficiency and reluctance in providing the general public with clear and trustworthy information by the media or other channels of communications [8].

CRISIS COMMUNICATIONS

CC is the process by which organizations and societies alike prepare CC plans and specific messages necessary for the entire set of interested

parties (i.e. the network of stakeholders) in response to crises. For the purpose of this research, a CC plan is defined as: *"the plan that considers the messages that will be communicated to those affected by the crisis including employees and families, as well as all related stakeholders"* [9].

CC is also defined as *"the communication between the organization and its public prior to, during, and after a negative event occurrence"* [10]. Accordingly, a three-staged model for the process of CC has been proposed in the literature and has been widely accepted when examining the effectiveness of CC. It divides a crisis into three stages: [10,11] (a) Pre-crisis; where actions are needed to be taken to prevent/prepare for the crisis; (b) response; actions and messages that need to be used to address the crisis; and (c) Post-crisis; where information is used to recover from the resulting adverse consequences.

Communication plays a key role throughout the entire crisis management effort. Crisis-related information must be collected and analysed before, during, and after the crisis whether organizational or social crises are considered. Managing the flow and evaluation of crisis-related information is one specific area where current research is emphasizing and further focuses more on stakeholder reactions and interactions to crises [12].

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BACKGROUND TO CULTURE

Culture is understood, interpreted and presented differently by various people and therefore many argue that the concept of culture could have various definitions. Culture is made of multiple elements; tangible and intangible, such as historical traditions, religious beliefs, indigenous knowledge, living styles, behaviours and values [6].

A number of researchers have argued that organizations should be conceptualized as cultures. They favour to view the culture of the organization as part of what an organization is rather than something an organization possesses. The authors argue that culture to an organization resembles its personality as it does to an individual.

Recently, culture has been increasingly linked to the study of organizational and social CC in the Arab World [13-16]. In this context, culture represents the set of attitudes, behaviours and methods of communications that are shared by the members of the social entity. It is described as the “*glue*” that binds people together and provides guidance and sense of direction during a crisis situation, which subsequently determines how people will communicate and interact.

The authors postulate that the Arab society has its own culture that has a considerable influence on Arabic organizations especially in terms of disaster and crisis management. For instance, it can be argued that the true view of Islam (being the main religion and source of faith for the entire Arab region) on disasters and crises and how it creates a religious incentive among its followers to take disaster risks seriously and, by understanding and using existing know-how, should instigate quick response and effective movement towards earthquake risk reduction policies and actions. The authors emphasize that risk communication and knowledge dissemination are usually compatible with people’s beliefs. This is substantiated by the fact that the proper use of Islamic teaching and knowledge of disaster and development can be an effective way of promoting safety in Islamic countries. Vitality and sustainable development can be achieved through faith, as an example, knowledge and the conduct of good deeds. “*If we reject wisdom and refuse to use the know-how that God has given us as his bounty, we will face “disaster”*” [15].

Therefore, Arabic organizations have a culture that is different from that of the West, and their

management systems are influenced by this culture noticeably. Religion, the Arabic language, masculinity and limited female involvement in both the society and business are just few attributes of this difference.

INFLUENCE OF CULTURE ON CRISIS COMMUNICATIONS

Management Levels

Any typical organization, including Arabic organizations are composed of different management levels; operational, tactical and strategic. These levels are not identified on the basis of value, (for example, the operational level is not less valued than the strategic)–however, they are recognized to provide a sense of organizational structure and communications flow. The more these levels are capable of exchanging information, the more effective communications is likely to become especially during crises [17,18].

Traditional Arab management systems and organizational structures lack cohesiveness and internal integration. Interaction between different business units and management levels is based on hierarchy aspects. Moreover, in many cases, organization charts do not exist. This causes lack of clarity of employees’ and managers’ roles and responsibilities and often ends up in poor handling of tasks and poor decision making. Furthermore, internal communications are controlled by lines of authority. Traditionally, Arab managers are reluctant to delegate authority and communicate decisions comprehensively. This limits the information exchange process and separates top-level managers from the rest of the organization [7,19].

The most up-to-date international standards however call for enterprise-wide and holistic approaches to CC including BS 11200:2014 (Crisis management. Guidance and good practice) and the ISO 22301:2012 (Business Continuity Management Systems) which have been accompanied by the need to establish new, flexible, and effective links between management levels that require improved structural and communications arrangements. Accordingly, CC best practice requires unrestricted interaction between various business units at different levels [20,21].

The authors propose that this approach to CC is less likely to succeed in a bureaucratic culture where rigid organizational structures mixed with fragmented involvement and inflexible communications exist. Subsequently, traditional Arabic organizational

structure and communication systems are likely to hinder the effective practice of CC. Moreover, emergency response, which is considered a key element in CC, is likely to be affected as a result of such structural complications. When structural constraints exist, employees are less likely to interact efficiently, share information, and have common understanding of crises situations, and subsequently will respond in a chaotic and unorganized manner.

Verbal Communications (Language)

Language helps to express and exchange ideas and enables people to communicate. The Arabic language is a major component of the Arab culture and is considered a symbol of identity. Arabic organizations are influenced by the Arabic language prominently with many employees using Arabic as the main language in the workplace.

To be successful in internal CC, managers need to be able to improvise, listen and talk to the employees, and their urgent needs. In this context, internal communications and organizational culture are closely connected. Hence, crisis communication and how well the employees respond to it mirrors the existing culture and subsequently the way people exchange and interpret particular messages [22].

This is also true for external CC where managers need to be able to improvise, listen and talk to the entire network of stakeholders. The same is also valid on social level where officials need to improvise, talk and listen (i.e. verbally communicate) with the general public in an effective way.

In CC, language is very influential. Fundamentally, CC aims at establishing common understanding between people during crisis and business interruptions by delivering the proper messages at the right time. A CC system works best when the speaker transmits clear messages to the audience who should interpret these messages correctly without irrelevant influences based on personal beliefs, culture or inherited values. In addition, and in the context of CC, risk perception and therefore corresponding response behaviours are substantially determined by the immediate and early lingual messages sent to the responders.

The use of Arabic as a first language in CC remains a factor attaching people to the rest of the entire set of Arab beliefs, traditions, and inherited values. Subsequently, this impacts CC and decision making

during crisis and slows down the establishment of modern and effective systems especially in the context of globalization where communication systems and the internet, on a global scale, use the English language [23-25].

Therefore, Arabic organizations are likely to be less efficient in practicing/adopting specific CC practices due mainly to the extensive use of the Arabic language as a main language at the workplace and as a driver for many day-to-day business operations. In addition, Arabic language, in its nature, is very influential because it is related to religion and is used across the entire Arab World. Therefore, it is considered as a building block for the whole set of Arab values and culture.

Gender Influences

Modern management theories and practices call for empowering women at work and enabling them to promote and achieve executive roles. As a key management function, communications also supports this view. Women perceive the world in a different way from men and consequently they have their own vision and contribution at work and in society which cannot be overlooked or underestimated [26].

However, gender segregation is amongst the features that characterize the Arab society. In many countries in the Arab World, women have had persistently low rates of employment and participation in the labor force. For those women who are successful in getting jobs, many of these jobs are concentrated at non-executive positions, limiting women's involvement in top-level management and decision making. Masculine cultures also maintain different standards for men and women in the society, where men are the subjects and women are the objects and where there is a lower level of working women in professional activities [6,22].

Gender segregation hinders significantly the best practice of CC. This is because enterprise-wide approach to CC should be based on teamwork and the creation of multiple groups of people in which female participation can contribute considerably to the development of successful communication strategies and action plans. Also, differences in payment frustrate women's determination, loyalty to the work place; reduce their productivity and innovation levels, as well as their willingness to share information with other employees.

Demography

Demography, which refers to the composition of a particular human population, includes a variety of factors. For the purpose of this research, and in the context of CC, key factors include: tribalism and religious affiliations. These factors have substantial influence on communications especially during crises.

There are two main types of culture; high and low context cultures. A high context culture is where members of the society are deeply involved with one another, forming intimate relationships. Existence of social hierarchies is a significant indicator of this culture. On the contrary, members in a low context culture are highly individualized, alienated and less involved with the other members of the society. Less social hierarchies characterize this culture. The Arab culture is placed in the middle of this continuum [6].

The “*conservative*” nature of the Arab society mandates and drives the formation of social hierarchies (tribal systems) in order to protect family interests and preserve tribal values and family patterns and heritage. The Traditional tribal structure is deeply rooted in the Bedouin culture.

Many organizations from various sectors are family owned where the father is the CEO/ owner and the majority of those employed are members of the same family, extended family or tribe. Tribalism also plays an extremely significant role in politics. The state itself, in many cases, depends on the tribal systems for authority and tribal laws for assisting the government.

In the context of CC in specific, a tribal system has the potential to drive the entire crisis communications effort into an ultimate failure since in a tribal system, the head of the tribe and some other key personnel, cannot be by-passed under all circumstances. This often means that they are the only decision makers and have the power to steer all other members of the tribe in specific directions, and since those people are often uneducated (illiterates), crises escalate and end up in disasters due to poor decisions, poor education, reliance on few specific people and the lack of necessary tools [27].

The authors support the view that communications effectiveness can also be influenced by beliefs regarding existing knowledge significantly especially when this knowledge is inspired by religion.

Religion consists of a belief in a supernatural power or powers that are regarded as the creators and

maintainers of the universe. Religions establish beliefs and values that define how people worship the divine being or divine forces and how they behave toward each other [28]. Religion has the greatest influence on the Arab society and organizations alike. It is reflected on various organizational activities and practices. The issue of the influence of religion on crisis communication in specific and on disaster and emergency management in general has been a subject of research in recent years.

In many Arab countries, crises and disasters represent divine punishment (God’s wrath) so pervasive that the only reaction for the devout believer is passive acceptance of suffering. Therefore, even the best CC efforts are deemed for failure including planning, response and even recovery [29].

POTENTIAL FACTORS THAT UNDERPIN THE ROLE OF CULTURE IN CRISIS COMMUNICATIONS

In recognition of the emergence of the “internationalisation” phase and the sound CC practices, which were accompanied by the introduction of new international standards that exceeded cultural and traditional practices, organizations and societies might not be able to embrace the new developments taking place in the field CC without some key amendments of culture. The following sections demonstrate a number of factors that have the potential to underpin the role of culture in the wider adoption of sound CC practices in Arabic organizations and society.

Adoption of International Standards

In various management disciplines, standardization of practices by using international standards is considered an effective mechanism to unify practices and reduce adverse impacts of cultural differences and diversity. Standardization exceeds national and regional borders and limitations and provides rigorous processes which should be undertaken by organizations in order to create a crisis communication plan for all organizations within all sectors. Standards and global frameworks also apply on social levels, such as the ‘Hyogo’ framework for implementation 2005-2015 and the later ‘Sendai’ framework 2015-2030 for Disaster Risk Reduction. CC is considered as an inseparable part of these global frameworks [30].

As the concept of CC has developed globally, there has been a convergence in the methodologies being promoted. It became apparent following the Year 2000

problem or 'millennium bug', when organizations were deluged with requests for compliance statements from their customers and clients, that there was a need for a uniform approach to CC, as well as other risk management frameworks.

Several 'BS' and 'ISO' standards have been released for CC in specific and for CC as part of more general risk, disaster and emergency management systems, such as: BS 25999-1:2006 (Business Continuity Management – Code of Practice); BS 25999-2:2007 (Business Continuity Management – Specification);

BS 11200:2014 (Crisis Management: Guidance and Good Practice); ISO 22301:2012 (Business Continuity Management Systems); PAS 200:2011 (Crisis Management-Guidance and Good Practice); ISO 22320:2011(Societal Security — Emergency Management — Requirements for Incident Response); ISO/IEC 24762:2008, Information technology – Security Techniques – Guidelines for Information and Communications Technology Disaster Recovery Services); ISO/IEC 27000 Family of standards (Information Security Management Systems) ISO/IEC 27001 in specific; BS 65000:2014 (Guidance on Organizational Resilience) and the most recent ISO 22316:2017 (Organizational Resilience- Principles and Guidelines) [31,32].

Work Relationships and Group Dynamics

Organizations across the Arab World in general are expanding at various levels. Employment policies more often exceed national borders and law of equal hiring opportunities is being applied on wider scales. Thus, workplace in recent years is becoming more diverse and multicultural. The future of crisis communications research is in studying and understanding the internal dynamics of organizations. Therefore, workplace relationships should be at the center of this internal approach to crisis communications [10,33].

In order to support the role of internal crisis communications, a detailed study of the relationship between an organization and its employees should be made at the very beginning. Few examples on how to improve internal communications include, for instance, engaging in honest and open discussions with employees regularly; fostering better understanding and employee support and increasing level of information exchange between higher managements and the lower levels (e.g. face-to-face communications which remain a decisive tool in facilitating effective

employee communications especially during crises) [34,35].

A number of authors emphasized the human component in the crisis communication process by focusing on the crisis management team members. In many situations, teams from different cultures are formed to handle a crisis where members must interact and participate in problem solving which can probably cause misunderstandings between members, as well as the organization. Hence, it is vital to understand the influence of culture on team work and group dynamics [36]. Nevertheless; working in groups helps to erase cultural differences and boosts mutual understanding and coexistence in both the society and the workplace.

Reducing the Influence of Traditional Religious Beliefs

The major practiced religion of the entire Arab region is Islam. Yet, it is significant to highlight the difference between the terms "Muslim" and "Arab" since they are used interchangeably very often by the general populace. In reality, the term Arab refers to a group of individuals whose primary language is Arabic whereas the term Muslim refers to a religious group who practice the Islamic faith [37].

As mentioned earlier in this paper, religion has the greatest influence on the Arab identity, society and organizations. Religion also controls almost every single aspect of daily life including transactions, people dynamics, education, business and many others, such as dealing with disasters and crises.

Very often, dealing with such incidents is based on religious beliefs which on many occasions are mixed with traditional legends and myths. It is also widely accepted in the Arab world that disasters and crises represent "*God's will or expressions*" of his wrath. Therefore, normal response to these incidents is total submission and acceptance of the adverse impacts of these incidents with low levels of preparedness and pro-action. Therefore, the same pattern of response is noticed whenever an incident occurs regardless of the nature or severity of that incident [18,36,38]. As a result, CC seems worthless under such conditions where people have already took the decision to give up trying to respond effectively due to their religious views.

A new approach is needed in order to change the mentality of traditional communities regarding the concepts of crises and disasters and the way they should be managed and mitigated. Adoption of new

technologies, systems and scientific research can help in reducing the influence of traditionally accepted religious “facts” and expanding the spectrum of strategic choices for dealing with crises [39,40].

Encouraging Female Participation and Contribution

Recognizing that countries are more peaceful and prosperous when women are given full and equal rights and opportunities, the Arab World remains socially conservative due to some general simplified sociotypes of gender differences in the Arab culture with relatively pronounced gender roles. Women normally stay at home as house-wives and rarely participate in public life.

The natural anatomy of women, in a cultural and biological, symbolic and natural sense is somehow different from that of men [41,42]. The authors argue that this is reflected in natural slight differences in the techniques in problem-solving, perception of the environment, models of representation, cycles of rest and other attributes. In this sense, it is important to value the differences between the two genders.

Crises may appear in different faces and therefore, in such cultural mind set, women can undoubtedly participate in many activities if not all, such as education and skill training, communal rehabilitation and group activities that aim at improving quality of life, in the same sense as men do.

Normally, and especially in conservative communities that are affected by crises such as the Arab World, organizations tend to entrust women with the lead in communicating to, rehabilitating and empowering other women. The general perception is that woman-to-woman communications, either individually or in groups, lead to better outcomes. One of the reasons is that men and women view the purpose of conversation differently. While men may use communications reflecting a kind of assertiveness; women use communications as a tool to enhance social connections and create relationships through being more expressive and tentative, in conversation especially in times of crises.

Women also see the purpose of conversation to create and foster an intimate bond with the other party by talking about topical problems and issues they are communally facing. Women value cooperation and desire to be close to others. Men and women may differ in their relations towards others in society noting

that women strive to be more social in their interactions.

For females, and perhaps due to the feminine touch, the process of communication itself is valued and usually uses less powerful speech. For instance, they tend to swear less, speak more politely, interrupt less than men do and often weaken their statements. Women generally are more socio-emotional in their interactions with others, whereas men are more independent and less emotional.

Men and women also cope with stress differently. This is crucial in times of crises. Men cope by retarding themselves from the conversation or situation while women cope by reaching out and talking about the cause of the stress. Men and women also differ in their communication style when resolving crises. Men follow their natural tendency to offer a solution while women seek empathy and are naturally inclined to offer unsolicited advice. Men approach conversations with the goal of transmitting information and offering advice, where women mainly aim to maintain interaction and seek understanding. This does not preclude the fact that both men and women can interchangeably excel in CC irrespective of the gender.

When crises occur, especially in some sectors, such as marketing and services, that heavily rely on direct communications and contact with the public, communication skills are highly valued and extremely important. Therefore, women are more likely to be hired in these positions because they are, by nature of their communications style, more adept than men for these jobs. Women are assumed to possess these skills because of the communication styles associated with their gender, giving them an advantage over men in the hiring process [43].

This paper argues that the existence of such characteristics in the anatomy and character-of women may instigates an added value to the quality of CC. Men and women can be trained to excel irrespective of their genders and assume equal and identical roles in CC.

CONCLUSION

Effective CC can contribute significantly to the reduction of risks and disasters facing organisations and societies especially those operating in the Arab world. The all-encompassing and enterprise-wide nature of CC requires organisational culture that is capable of supporting key CC activities, such as

teamwork, collaborations and flexible exchange of information. However, some aspects of the Arab culture may slow down or prevent the wider adoption of effective CC.

This research has contributed to the understanding of the significance of culture in CC. It has argued that organisational culture has the potential to hinder or support the development and wider adoption of effective CC practices. The factors underpinning the role of culture in CC that have been discussed in this paper do not represent an exhaustive list of all factors, but rather the key ones only.

Further research can investigate other cultural factors that might hinder or support the wider adoption of effective CC practices in the Arab world, as well as in other different cultural contexts.

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