

## The Critical Role of Crisis Communication Plan in Corporations' Crises Preparedness and Management

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***Abstract:***

Many corporations have a Crisis Management Plan (CMP), which is designed to handle crises. These plans may include crisis response drills, evacuation plans, and standby machines/generators. However, when it comes to communication during a crisis, many organizations are ill-prepared because they lack a Crisis Communication Plan (CCP). Following the September 21, 2013 attack on the Westgate Mall in Nairobi, the public's praises for the security forces swiftly degenerated into blame, insults, and expressions of betrayal. The government seemed unprepared. There was no clearly spelt out CCP detailing what and when to release information, as well as who and how to make the release. Hence, every step the government took to give updates about the attack and what it was doing to secure the mall and save people was challenged by the media and the public. The lack of a CCP was evident in the presentation of several spokespersons by the authorities, double talk, conflicting messages, and uncertainty on the matter. This paper thus argues that while corporations strive for a variety of strategies for crisis management, there is need to also enshrine CCP in their CMP. It utilizes Coombs' (2012) three-stage crisis management model that carefully considers the pre-crisis, crisis, and post-crisis stages. Focusing on selected corporations in Kenya that suffered crises between June 1, 2012 and October 30, 2013, this research holds that the crises duration and negative impact could have been lessened if the organizations integrated effective CCP in their CMP.

***Keywords:*** Crises; Crisis Communication Plan; Crisis Communication; Crisis Management Plan; Crisis Management; Crisis Preparedness

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**Résumé:**

Plusieurs grandes entreprises ont un plan de gestion de crise (PGC), lequel est désigné pour régler les crises. Ces plans incluent des exercices de sauvetage, des plans d'évacuation et des plans d'intervention de machines/générateurs. Cependant lorsqu'arrive la communication durant une crise, plusieurs organisations sont mal préparées à cause du manque d'un plan de communication de crise (PCC). Suite à l'attaque du Centre d'achats Westgate Mall à Nairobi le 21 septembre 2013, les premiers éloges publics des forces de sécurité ont rapidement dégénérées en blâme, insultes et manifestation. Le manque d'un plan d'urgence détaillant les modes de communication de l'information, laissa croire à l'absence de préparation du gouvernement lorsqu'en état de crise. Depuis, chaque actions posées par le gouvernement pour informer des mises à jour sur l'attaque et ce qu'il devait faire pour sécuriser le centre d'achat et sauver des vies a été contesté par les médias et le public. Le manque de PCC était évident notamment dans la présentation de plusieurs des porte-paroles par les autorités, de la présence de double discours, de messages conflictuels et d'incertitudes concernant les événements. Cet article argumente que, lorsque les entreprises s'efforcent d'utiliser une variété de stratégies lors de crises de gestion, il devient nécessaire d'inclure un PCC au sein de leur PGC. Pour ce faire, nous utilisons le modèle de gestion de crise en trois phases de Coombs (2012) examinant la pré-crise, la crise et l'après-crise. Basé sur une étude de cas de sociétés Kenyennes ayant souffert de crises entre le 1er juin 2012 et le 30 octobre 2013, cette recherche soutient que la durée des crises et l'impact négatif auraient été réduits si les organisations avaient intégré efficacement un PCC dans leur PGC.

**Mots-clés:** Communication de crises; Crises; Plan de communication de crise; Gestion de crises; Plan de gestion de crises; Préparation aux crises

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**Introduction**

A crisis can and will happen, to any organization or individual, at any place and time, be they schools, hospitals, factories, airports, banks, shopping malls, hotels, Non-Governmental Organizations, private businesses, media houses, or even individual public figures. As correctly expressed by Argenti (2012), crises are inevitable, and it is thus not a question of *if*, but *when*, a crisis will happen. When it comes to crises, organizations are better off acknowledging the “Murphy factor”: *anything that can go wrong, will go wrong* (Parsons, 1996). Crises may occur with little or no warning at all. This is being witnessed at local, national, and international levels. No organization or individual is immune to crisis—only the magnitude can differ. Therefore, all should be prepared for crisis. Organizations that have a Crisis Communication Plan (CCP) are better situated to appropriately address a crisis and return to normalcy in a relatively short time. A crisis is “a major occurrence with a potentially negative outcome affecting the organization, company, or industry, as well as its publics, products, services, or good name” (Fearn-Banks,

2007: 2), disturbing the normal functioning of a corporation for an indefinite period of time. A crisis interrupts normal business transactions and can sometimes threaten the existence of the organization.

In Kenya, industrial action, commonly known as strike, has become synonymous with putting one's point across. It has developed into a normal way of doing things, an acceptable private and public sector culture. Between the period of June 1, 2012 to October 30, 2013, Kenya experienced more than five nationwide strikes. This included the primary and secondary school teachers, doctors, nurses, university lecturers, and city council workers. They all went on strike for a variety of reasons. Mostly, they were demanding higher pay and better working conditions.

It is important to note that before going on strike, respective bodies of those intending to strike normally give a 14- or 21-day strike notice. However, prior to the notice as well as during the notice period, they display certain indicators that tend to reveal that they would be striking. That is, the strikes are preceded with warning signs, which Barton (2001) calls *prodromes*.

Despite the forewarnings, whenever there is a strike in Kenya in the public or private sector, it seems that everyone—students, parents, government, guardians, and literally all internal and external publics—are caught unaware and ill-prepared. Patients die, schools close, parents seem stranded with their children, and costs of transportation and living suddenly rise. Another important factor is the preparedness in communication during the crisis. While the striking workers present one spokesperson, the government and religious institutions present several people speaking for and on its behalf. More often than not, they issue contradictory statements. For instance, in June 2013 during the teachers' nationwide strike, on the very day the Cabinet Secretary for Education indefinitely closed all public schools, the Deputy President was meeting the representatives of the teachers union to discuss the strike. The Deputy President and the teachers' representatives arrived at an amicable return-to-work resolution and called off the strike, the same day (Okumu, 2013, July 17). Thus, one government official indefinitely closed all public schools, but another called off the strike. Consequently, parents, pupils, students, guardians, and all stakeholders were taken by surprise and confusion. They were unsure whether to report to school or proceed home. The Education Cabinet Secretary was adamant that the children had to go home since schools would remain closed indefinitely. However, the teachers resumed duty the following day, obeying the Deputy President and union leaders, and thus adding crisis on crisis. This is because teachers reported on duty, but the parents kept their children at home (Liloba, 2013, July 22).

Presentation of several spokespersons and the issuing of contradictory statements also happened during the medical doctors' strike in 2012. The then Minister for Health, Professor Anyang' Ny'ongo "sacked" all striking doctors, advertised their jobs, and ordered all heads of public hospitals across the country to recall all medical personnel on leave, recruit new ones, and also appealed to the retired doctors to report to hospitals for re-employment (Matata, 2012, September 26). His Excellency, Mwai Kibaki, the then president of the Republic of Kenya, intervened and together with the representatives of the striking doctors generated a return to work resolution that was agreeable to all parties. In these examples, the communication from the government side seemed haphazardly done and more of a quick fix. They seemed to have a Crises Management Plan (CMP) that was lacking the CCP. A CCP enshrined in a CMP would help in addressing a crisis and restoring the company's image in a relatively short time. A CCP details not only the steps an organization will take to handle a crisis but clearly shows who will do what. The purpose of this study therefore is to emphasize the critical role of a CCP in corporations' CMP.

## Literature Review

### *Crisis Makers*

There are various types of crises; some are described next. Product failure occurs when a product causes harm to its consumers is one type. Cases of product failure include Toyota's recall of 9,000,000 cars in January 2010, that was occasioned by automobile floor mats that possessed the risk of sliding forward and trapping the gas pedal causing unintended acceleration of the vehicle (Monden, 2012). Another type is corporate misbehaviour, which occurs when an organization handles an issue in a manner that shows that it does not care about the public. An example of this is the Exxon Mobil disaster of 1989 where a 987-foot tanker that was made for over 1,000,000 barrels of crude oil, ran aground on Bligh Reef in Prince William Sound, Alaska, causing a 10,000,000-gallon oil spillage. Other than the ecological, commercial, and financial consequences of the spillage, the handling of the crisis itself was also a crisis. Exxon Valdez management was criticized on three aspects—inability to put across an effective and efficient CMP, refusal to provide the media with information, and lack of care.

The death of the leader of a company, which leaves the stakeholders wondering if there is anyone who can fill the shoes of the one who led the company, is another type of crisis. When Dave Thomas—founder of the American fast-food chain, Wendy's—died in 2002, the company was left in a quagmire trying to figure out who could take over, especially since three of the people who would have taken the job had died in a six year period. Wendy's also had a challenge trying to run things “Dave's way” (Schmitt, Rogers & Vrotsos, 2004).

Spokesperson misbehaviour and controversy that can lead to the organization being negatively associated with the misdemeanours of the spokesperson is another form of crisis. When sexual assault charges against Kobe Bryant, a United States basketball star athlete, were made public in 2003, companies that were using him as their spokesperson such as Nike, McDonalds, Sprite, and Spalding found themselves in a tricky situation. They had to make a decision to either maintain his contract, a move that could cause damage to these corporations' images, or back out of the contract, a move that would have been very costly (White, Goddard & Wilbur, 2009).

### *The Three-Stage Approach to Crisis Management*

As indicated at the beginning of this paper, many organizations have a CMP to deal with crises. One of the CMP models is the three-stage approach by Coombs (2012), which consists of the pre-crisis, crisis, and post-crisis. The pre-crisis stage calls for a proactive approach and tends to take all possible actions to prevent crises. The pre-crisis stage is divided into three sub-stages of signal detection, prevention, and crisis preparation. “The pre-crisis stage entails actions to be performed before a crisis is encountered. However, not all crises can be prevented, so organization members must prepare for crises as well” (Coombs, 2012: 11). The signal detection, or *prodromes*, calls for dealing with the early warning signs emitted by the crises, because if early action is taken, then the crises can be avoided all together. Coombs also emphasizes, in this stage, that once a potential crisis has been detected, actions must be taken to prevent the crisis from taking place.

Sometimes, organizations note that there is a looming crisis, but they do not take any action due to what McCray, Gonzalez, and Darling (2011) call “crisis paralysis” or obsessive

decision making with other things other than the looming crisis. They state that if a crisis is caught at this stage, it can even be turned into an opportunity for the organization and its management.

The second stage, the crisis, begins with a trigger event that marks the beginning of the crisis. According to Coombs (2012), this phase has two sub-stages: crisis recognition and crisis containment. Appropriate communication to stakeholders at this stage is crucial. Crisis containment “focuses on the organization’s crisis response, including the importance and content of the initial response, communication’s relationship to reputational management, contingency plans, and follow-up concerns” (Coombs, 2012: 12).

The third and last stage is the post-crisis. Coombs (2012) explains that when a crisis is resolved and is over, the organization must consider what to do next. He notes that post-crisis actions help to make the organization better prepared for the next crisis, make sure stakeholders are left with a positive impression of the organization’s crisis management efforts, and check to make sure that the crisis is truly over.

Thus, as articulated by Coombs’ three-stage model, the importance of crisis management cannot be overemphasized. In the same regard, the value of crisis communication before, during, and after a crisis cannot be ignored (Fearn-Banks, 2008).

### ***Crisis Resolution Stage***

McCray, Gonzales, and Darling (2011) state that at the crisis resolution stage, the organization should be looking for ways of transforming the crisis into an opportunity. As much as at this stage the fire has died down, it is also important to note that this can also be seen as the start of another crisis because of the ripple effects of a crisis. For example, the management of the organization could have in one of the quick fix strategies opened up a Pandora’s Box, which could be another crisis waiting to happen. It is therefore vital that even as a corporation gets back to normalcy after a crisis, it should look at all the things that may at this point be prodromes of an oncoming storm.

### **The Critical Role of CCP in Corporation’s Crises Preparedness and Management**

As Fearn-Banks (2007) explains, CCP is an essential part of the CMP. CCP is vital because it provides relevant information on who will speak during a crisis, the cost of communication, and other activities during a crisis. The CCP not only provides one source of news but also shows preparedness on the part of the corporation in handling crisis. A corporation should not only communicate to both its internal and external publics in times of crises, but also prior to, during, and after the negative occurrence, with strategies designed to minimize damage to the image of the organization.

The CCP helps in the identification of one primary spokesperson for the organization. Designating one primary spokesperson reduces the possibility of conflicting statements, conflicting organization values, or conflicting explanations being released to the media. Speaking with one voice is crucial in times of a crisis. Additionally, the CCP helps spokespersons to come up with statements and rehearse those statements and talking points enough to be comfortable with the information, to be comfortable in front of the media and public, and so prepared that he or she need only glance occasionally at notes. Preferably, before a

crisis, the CCP ought to provide practice sessions that give spokespersons an opportunity to emulate an actual crisis news conference.

Another vital role of the CCP is that it identifies alternative spokespersons in the event that the primary spokesperson is not available during a crisis. The CCP also helps in designing major talking points for CEOs, spokespersons, top executives, and public relations professionals. The CCP further helps an organization not to prolong the crisis by calling an unnecessary news conference or by engaging in other activities that can keep the crisis in the news.

Fearn-Banks (2007) further explains that one of the most critical areas within any corporate communication function is the media relations department. This is because the media are both a constituency and a conduit through which investors, employees, and consumers receive information about and form images of a company. Thus the CCP will guide organizations in ensuring that they do not just do what is right, but that they also let the public know what they are doing; that is, communicate.

Eventually, when the crisis is over, corporations learn from the crisis. The learning phase is a process of examining the crisis and determining what was lost, what was gained, and how the organization performed during the crisis. However, some corporations, like the ones earlier discussed in this paper, never seem to learn from past crises. Year in year out teachers strike, preceded by the same prodromes, yet same, negative, or worse effects are felt. The learning stage ought to be an evaluative procedure designed to make the crisis a *prodrome* for the future. This is due to the fact that, just because a company has suffered one crisis, it is not a guarantee that it will not happen again. The learning phase should bring about change that helps prevent future crises.

During a crisis, diverse communication roles and activities are important in obtaining corporate communication goals. Crisis communication requires communicators to be creative, inspiring, and adaptive in establishing a professional and productive relationship with the press. That is, a vocation, not a profession. Maintaining such a relationship is an ongoing effort that must be nurtured carefully so that an organization is able to paint a certain picture of events that are occurring to or around it.

### **Situational Crisis Communication Theory**

A theoretical framework is a collection of interlinked ideas based on theories. Researchers use theoretical frameworks to show the relationship between concepts. The communication theory that provides a theoretical framework for studying the role of effective crisis communication planning is Coomb's (2012) Situation Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT). The SCCT identifies how various aspects of the crisis situation, including crisis communication, affect how stakeholders view the crisis and the corporation's reputation. Having an understanding of how stakeholders view various strategies employed during the crisis helps corporate communication managers come up with appropriate crisis communication strategies in order for stakeholders to support the actions taken by the corporation during the crisis.

SCCT may help the corporation to analyze which crisis communication strategy is best suited to have the best results, before the crisis strikes. The theory focuses on an analysis of the crisis communication strategies by corporate communication managers in order to best prepare for the threats that come with the crisis. Application of SCCT leads or influences the stakeholders to think highly of the corporation during attribution. This opportunity to influence opinion is only available if crisis communication planning is done proactively, that is, before the crisis strikes.

Corporations need time to think through how the stakeholders will react so that they can employ crisis communication strategies that the stakeholders will approve of. This will in turn ensure that the stakeholders view the corporation in good light, and the corporation will continue to enjoy its reputational standing, which is vital for its operations.

### **Conceptual Framework**

A conceptual framework is an illustration of how the various variables addressed are linked with the study. The conceptual framework in this case looks at two angles that can be applied by any given corporation. Even before a crisis happens, a corporation can either do nothing with regard to crisis preparedness or undertake proactive crisis communication planning. When the inevitable crisis happens, events tend to roll out differently based on what actions were taken before the crisis. An organization that ignores the importance of early crisis communication planning finds itself handling the crisis in an “ad hoc” fashion, which is a perfect recipe for many mistakes. “If you fail to plan you plan to fail”, goes an old adage. This in turn leads to loss of support from key stakeholders as the corporation’s management comes off looking incompetent. The last straw of a corporation that ignores proactive CCP is drawn when the corporation faces closure based on its handling of the crisis.

On the flipside, a well thought out CCP, leads to the roll out of a well-coordinated crisis communication strategy. The corporation is then able to maintain favourable relationships with its stakeholders in a post-crisis environment, as well as finding itself in better reputational standing than before the crisis. A crisis is a time when key decisions that impact the future of a company are made because it is not the crisis that counts, but the way the crisis is handled. This means that the decisions made, the actions taken, and the way matters are prioritized and handled, will have an effect on the profitability and even continuity of the organization. This involves investing time, resources, and manpower.

All through the crisis, the organization must show empathy to the stakeholders and victims of the crisis. It should be clear that the company is doing everything in its power to alleviate the suffering or discomfort of the people directly and indirectly affected by the crisis.

The fact that a crisis will occur and may be witnessed globally means that the consequences are on a global scale. Proper contingency measures put in place beforehand can curtail a crisis or make it easier to contain. Crisis management is not seen as a very important activity when things are going well in the organization. It is, however, impossible to plan during a crisis because at this time, people are moving fast to protect their own interests. It is extremely vital for an organization to engage in an on-going analysis of the environment, where it comes up with solutions and contingencies for potential crisis situations (McCray, Gonzalez & Darling, 2011).

Crisis management ought to involve crisis communication that goes beyond protecting the organization’s reputation. Thus two-way, symmetrical communication is vital. Sometimes, there is a general tendency to think that crisis communication is typically an after-the-crisis activity. Crisis communication is not just about safeguarding the image of the corporation. It is about minimizing fear and reducing risk; thus, negating conspiracy theory (Baran & Davis, 2009).

## **Importance of Proactive Crisis Communication Planning**

Heller and Darling (2012) state that how a corporation handles a crisis is more consequential than how things were before. Friedman (cited in Heller & Darling, 2012) describes the current environment as a triple convergence of the elimination of walls, ceilings, and floors to create a new flat world platform. This is a result of the Internet and its accompanying effect of globalization, which puts organizations firmly in the spotlight. As the information technology industry grows day by day, it further links the world, making information access instant across the world. This factor has also widened the scope of accountability for organizations. Any move they take will be seen globally and will also be scrutinized and analyzed at an international level. Locally also, people are more aware of what companies are doing and this compels them to live up to high standards of accountability. For corporations, the handling of a crisis becomes even more sensitive because of the number of people who are watching the corporation's next move. One example is how the media influence the perceptions of stakeholders toward a corporation. Fearn-Banks (2007) says that it is through the media that the public gets to know about a crisis, more than through any other channel. Though a corporation may have to go out of its way to get media coverage during normal times, it is not so during a crisis situation. The media will go out of their way to look for information from the organization or any other source during the crisis.

With the above background, the objectives of this study are: 1) to sensitize corporations to identify early warning signs (*prodromes*) to a crisis; 2) to persuade corporations to address the *prodromes*; and 3) to argue on the relevance of corporations enshrining CCP in their CMP.

## **Methodology**

The research uses a case study/critical incident analysis approach by examining corporate communication responses to incidents from fields ranging from healthcare, to education and religious organizations. Of particular emphasis are most recent crises in Kenya that took place in the period June 1, 2012 to October 30, 2013. The study then briefly describes the nature of the crises, how the concerned parties addressed them, and the role of corporate communication in the crisis management. The choice of crises from varied fields is so as to provide wide-ranging examples of the crises that have taken place in Kenya, and how key stakeholders responded to them. This study relies on news media coverage and discourse as a basis for evaluating the CCP adopted in selected incidents. News reports and coverage are taken from radio, television, and newspapers.

A research population is a whole collection of individuals, events, or objects with a common observable characteristic. The population for this study is major organizations that had a nationwide crisis in Kenya in the period June 1, 2012 to October 30, 2013. The timeline was chosen with the goal of getting representative, yet manageable cases from various sectors.

## **Corporations that Suffered a Crisis Between June 1, 2012 and October 30, 2013**

The selected crises that took place in Kenya within the period under review are as follows.



***Attack on the Westgate Mall in Nairobi***

For the period under review, this is the most recent crisis that Kenya has faced. On September 21, 2013, approximately 10 to 15 gunmen, according to security officials estimate, attacked the upscale Westgate shopping Mall in Nairobi (Nation Team, 2013, September 26). The attack, which lasted until September 24, 2013, resulted in at least 72 deaths, including 61 civilians, six Kenyan soldiers, and five attackers. Over 200 people were reportedly wounded in the mass shooting (Ibid). However, all these numbers are disputable because different sources cite different figures. The prodromes in this crisis, as reported in the media after the Westgate Attack (e.g., Nation Reporter, 2013, September 24; Sanga, 2013, September 24) were the continual warnings of the terror attack on the Kenyan major cities, shopping malls, or eating places.

Initially, the security forces were praised for their response to the attack. But the public's attitude soon degenerated to blame, insults, and criticism of the authorities when it seemed apparent that the government lacked adequate CMP and CCP necessary to address the crisis. A significant gap in the CMP was the absence of organized and coordinated public communication strategy detailing what and when to release information, as well as who and how to make the release. Official communication on the crisis was not timely, often contradictory, and inadequate. As a result, the public relied on rumours and media practitioners, who often filled the information with guesses, speculations, and rumours as to the identities, numbers, and motives of the attackers as well as the number of casualties. This was a failure of the basic principle of crisis communication, resulting from a lack of planning. The public grew to distrust the information from the government. Hence every step the government took to give updates about the attack and what it was doing to secure the mall and save people was challenged by the media and general public (Leftie, 2013, September 26). One of the government's drawbacks was the presentation of several spokespersons as authority, double talk, conflicting messages, and uncertainty on the matter (e.g., Mosoku & Ombati, 2013, September 24; Nation Team, 2013, September 26).

***Christian Churches***

In all Christian churches, during any wedding, a rhetorical question is asked: "is there anyone who is objecting to these two being declared husband and wife?" In almost all cases, no one in the church objects. However, this question ought to be taken as a prodrome by the Christian churches. It has always been taken for granted that no one would object. So it is more of a rhetorical question; a mere formality and fulfillment of a church wedding ritual. But in 2012, it happened in one Christian church in Nairobi.

On Saturday August 11, 2012, Mary Mwihaki Nyaga, a member of Nairobi Pentecostal Church (NPC) Valley Road, and a Nakuru Pastor, John Waitura Wachira were about to be joined as one in holy matrimony. When the congregation was asked if they had any objection to the union, a lady in the crowd, Tabitha Wanjiku, objected to the marriage claiming that the pastor had impregnated her. Another congregant, John Ng'anga, also stood and claimed that the pastor had a relationship with his late mother, gave her a child and then deserted her.

This story was aired the same day and subsequent days on national television stations. The story was also carried on the major newspapers. The media further reported that from their investigations, Pastor John Waitura Wachira also had children with five other women in Nakuru (e.g., NTV Kenya, 2012, August 11a; NTV Kenya, 2012, August 11b).

The NPC-Valley Road was caught unaware by the crisis and the negative publicity. In addressing the issue, several people—lawyers, church elders, pastors of other Christian churches, as well as several members of the congregation from the NPC-Valley Road Church attempted to explain the church’s position. There was no official/formal communication from the church stating its stand. Everyone and anyone who had something to say about the incident did so, but the image of NPC-Valley Road was and still is tainted. This unfortunate happening at NPC could befall any other Christian church in the country. Hence the question: how prepared are Christian churches to address a “YES, I object” response from the congregation during weddings? Pastor Wachira’s status as a member of the clergy hurt the reputation of the church, as his actions were associated with the church. This would not have been the case was he an ordinary member of the church. Again the silence of the church gave room for the media and others to frame the public discourse and perception of the crisis.

### ***Teachers***

Kenyan teachers tend to strike every year. For instance, in 2012, the strike began on September 3, 2012 with about 240,000 teachers. Their major complaint was the government’s failure to deliver on a 150-200% pay raise awarded in 1997. The teachers’ greatest anguish was that they were barely paid a just and fair wage while politicians award themselves hefty salaries and wages. This strike ended on September 26, 2012, thus taking 3 weeks, when the government finally agreed to increase the teachers’ salaries in phases.

In 2013, the same 240,000 teachers began a nationwide strike on June 24 over the government’s failure to increase their hardship, special, house, medical, and commuter allowances. This strike, which lasted 24 days, ended on July 17, 2013. One of the key features of this strike was that on the day the Cabinet Secretary for Education closed all public schools in the country, the Deputy President was having a meeting with leaders of the teachers and called off the strike. So, on the same day, one key Kenyan government official indefinitely closed all public primary and secondary schools due to strike, and another concluded a negotiation to call off the strike. The handling of the teachers’ strike by the Ministry of Education was not properly done from a crisis communication point of view. The government not only presented more than one spokesperson, but these spokespersons also had conflicting approaches and messages.

### ***University Lecturers***

This strike, which began on September 6, 2012, brought together the University Academic Staff Union (UASU) and the University Non-Teaching Staff Union (UNTESU). About 15,000 university workers and lecturers from the 19 Public Universities and their constituent colleges went on strike, paralyzing learning for more than 200,000 regular and parallel (self-sponsored) students. UASU and UNTESU were disappointed to learn that the government had reneged on a promise to increase their salaries. They were shocked that up to 1.8 billion Kenya Shillings meant for lecturers and non-teaching staff pay raise was missing from government’s allocations (Rajab, 2012, September 26).

This job boycott came barely three months after another strike that saw the workers paralyze activities in public institutions of higher learning for a period of three weeks. It is worth noting that both strikes were preceded by several *prodromes*, among them being the strike notice and the go-slow. But when the strike took place, the government and the concerned institutions

were ill-prepared. The institutions were filthy, students were sent home, and there was back and forth talk between the government and the leaders of UASU and UNTESU. The government threatened to sack the striking workers, terming the strike illegal and unconstitutional. There was no other plan in place either by the government or the universities because every activity at the academic institutions came to a standstill. Thus, the strike took too long to be resolved, only being called off on September 20, 2012.

### *Nurses*

The nurses' strike, which begun on December 3, 2012 lasted more than two months, ending on February 11, 2013. This strike paralyzed operations in all public hospitals. The nurses were demanding the registration of Kenya National Union of Nurses (KNUN), improved salary and allowances, and modern medical equipment for their work. The Ministry for Labour, through the National Labour Board, had stood its ground and declined to register KNUN, claiming that the nurses were adequately represented by the Union of Kenya Civil Servants. Further, the government declared the strike illegal and slapped disciplinary measures on the striking workforce, which included withholding of nurses' salaries and random transfers to regions deemed as hardship areas.

It is important to note that most, not all, nurses were striking. The striking nurses would invade hospitals and beat up nurses who were working in an attempt to force them to join the strike. Thus, the nurses strike affected all hospitals because the nurses willing to work chose to keep away from hospitals due to fear of being attacked by colleagues. Patients died. Both out and in-patients were wreathing in pain, unattended. Three months is a very long period for nurses to put down their tools, even if they were offering emergency services.

On February 11, 2013 a deal was reached between the nurses and the government and the strike was called off after a ruling by the industrial court in favour of the nurses. According to the agreement, the government was required to release the nurses' December 2012 and January 2013 salaries and reabsorb all employees who had been dismissed for absconding duty.

### *Medical Doctors*

Kenyan medical doctors went on strike on September 13, 2012. This strike lasted three weeks. They were protesting the dilapidated state of public healthcare. Doctors wanted the government to spend more money on hiring more qualified workers and to purchase ultra-modern medical equipment. Doctors were only giving emergency treatment. The striking doctors finally called off the strike on October 4, 2012, following a deal they signed with the government.

Among the things agreed upon was that all doctors sacked because of the strike would be reinstated and their salaries paid in full. The pending cases in the Industrial Court would also be withdrawn. Further, all doctors who had been working without pay, including intern doctors, would be paid and their salaries backdated to the time they started offering their services. Additionally, 70 doctors who had not been posted would also be posted immediately.

### **Common Features in all these Strikes**

One key point in all of these crises is that despite the prodromes to people in authority (mainly government), as well as internal and external publics, all seemed to have been caught unaware.

Further, despite the fact that strikes take place often and tend to repeat, those people being served or who are in charge of these institutions are always caught unaware. Additionally, the communication that occurs during the crisis period is one that increases the crisis, as opposed to reducing it. For instance, there is double talk, more than one centre of communication, or just no communication at all to the public. As a result, these crises take a long time to be addressed.

Another common feature is the “no comment” responses that were made by either party to the public through the press. Failure to respond denied the public the opportunity to hear both sides of the story and thus, the public tended to pass judgment on who was guilty. This is basically because refusing to comment makes people conclude that one must have done something wrong to warrant such a reply. Even if there were some legal reason for not revealing certain information, explaining this as much as possible with a promise to reveal the information at a specific time would be more appreciated by the public. This is especially important because even if an organization assumes, wishes, or even just prays for the crisis to go away, it actually does not.

Cornelissen states that “failure to respond effectively to the media’s enquiries about a crisis will invariably lead to journalists seeking information from whatever sources they can, even if it is not accurate” (2011: 207). Thus, the acceptance by corporations in Kenya to develop and enshrine a CCP in their CMP will be of great value and benefit to the respective corporations. There is a gap in crisis communication practice whereby corporations tend to put up *ad hoc* crisis communication strategies to deal with a situation, and once the fire dies out, with it goes crisis communication.

When covering a crisis, the media tend to leave no stone unturned. The media will not necessarily give out the information that the public needs to know during a crisis, but the information that the media thinks the public needs to hear (Fearn-Banks, 2007). What the media reports is what will stick in the minds of the public and is what will go ahead to form the basis for determining the reputation of an organization. Information about a crisis in a corporation gets to the public through media. Thus, media relations are vital. Part of the CCP in preparedness and management of crises also involve media.

## **Conclusion**

I concur with Coombs: “Crisis Communication is a relatively young discipline born of a need to address very real problems” (2012: 186). I dare to add that while it is a young field, probably globally, it is a younger field in Kenya. Thus, the purpose of this paper has been to persuade Kenyan corporations to enshrine CCP in their CMP. The future step, after this persuasion, will be to help them develop a CCP. But first, they must be persuaded. Part of the persuasion lies in the reality that “a crisis is unpredictable but not unexpected” (Coombs, 2012: 3).

This study has shown that most crises in Kenya emit prodromes, but when they happen they take long to end, and after ending they tend to recur in this same pattern. One of the reasons is that prodromes are not taken seriously, as well as the reality that while corporations have CMP, they lack the CCP. Therefore, talking corporations into accepting to enshrine the CCP in their CMP will be the success of this paper.

Cornelissen (2011) notes that when an organization may have a crisis plan, the corporation’s management find themselves in a situation whereby they do not know which issue demands prominence over others during a crisis. This leads to total mismanagement of the situation. Crisis management on the other hand offers a systematic approach for dealing with the

crisis situation in order to have the least amount of impact. Fearn-Banks (2007) says that crisis management allows the organization to be more in control of its situation since it assists in curtailing risks and managing crises.

Crisis management includes CCP, which is the two-way symmetrical communication between an organization and the public before, during, and after the crisis and identifies the various sections that will need to be handled during a crisis (Fearn-Banks, 2007). The advantage of having a pre-existing CCP is not only that the crisis will be handled effectively when it arises, but it also gives an avenue to detect crisis potential before one actually breaks out and mitigation measures can be applied.

During a crisis, everything counts. If systems had not been put in place in advance, then a hurriedly put together crisis communication strategy may cause the corporation to further crumble. There is therefore great need to have an effectively working CCP in place that is constantly referred to and updated, for use when a crisis strikes.

Kash and Darling (cited in Ritchie, Bentley, Koruth & Wang, 2011) state that the most important aspect in the resolution of a crisis lies in proactive crisis communication. This refers to the preventive efforts that are as a result of proactive planning before any signs of a crisis even appear. This view is also adopted by Meyers and Holusha (cited in Hayes & Patton, 2001). They say there are two types of crises: a managed crisis and an unmanaged crisis. They further advocate that corporations should take up proactive approaches to crisis communication. Hayes and Patton (2001) point out that though organizations have relatively high expectations of a crisis because of financial implications, they still do not place proactive crisis communication as a priority in their corporation strategies.

Pauchant and Mitroff (cited in Hayes & Patton, 2001) say that organizations that have prepared for a crisis will recover two or three times as fast as those which are not prepared. Proactive crisis communication not only saves the organization from the crisis, or at least minimizes the impact of the crisis, it also saves the organization money. It is cheaper to deal with a crisis when a plan is in place than when random actions are being taken in a panic-stricken state.

Ritchie and colleagues (2011) have given three aspects of crisis communication: crisis planning that takes place before a crisis, the implementation of a crisis plan during the crisis, and control after the crisis. Crisis planning describes all the actions taken in the first and proactive stage of crisis management, including the creation of crisis teams, as well as crisis training and simulation exercises. It is this advance preparation to handle a crisis that alleviates or eliminates a crisis, and if the corporation plays its cards right, it can get a better reputation after than what it had before the crisis (Fearn-Banks, 2007). For the purpose of this study, CCP refers to the strategies that corporations put in place to handle crises before, during, and after the occurrence of a crisis.

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