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Fukushima Nuclear Disaster: A Study in Poor Crisis Communication

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Synopsis

The Japanese government's response to the nuclear disaster at Fukushima failed to observe fundamental principles of good crisis communication. It is a striking reminder that advanced planning and training of all stakeholders is necessary to face such challenges.

Commentary

IN THE FACE of the triple disaster in northeastern Japan involving an earthquake, a tsunami and a nuclear meltdown at the Fukushima Daiichi power plant, the resilience and stoicism exhibited by the Japanese people has been much admired internationally. However, the Japanese government's communication with respect to the nuclear accident is less commendable as actions taken seemed to run counter to core elements of good crisis communication.

Admittedly, a number of systemic factors peculiar to Japan led to the government's mishandling of its communication with the public. Amongst these is the so-called "iron triangle": the close and often shady relationships between business executives, bureaucrats, and politicians who use their old-boy networks to further their goals, at times circumventing rules and regulations. Prime Minister Naoto Kan had always been an outside critic of these networks. In consequence, he could not and did not want to access the triangle's resources which could have helped to manage the crisis.

Loss of trust in government

However, thorough preparation could have helped the government organise its information processing and sharing, and communicate effectively. Instead, both the Japanese government and Tokyo Electric Power Company (TEPCO), the company running the nuclear power plant, tried to reassure the population and conveyed information in drips and drabs. This is anathema to accepted crisis communication best practices. Experts recommend being truthful, forthcoming, and transparent throughout the crisis in order to remove uncertainty and maintain trust in the authorities. Short-term gains through underplaying the seriousness may give a (false) sense of security but are likely to translate into a loss of confidence in the authorities in the long-term.

While the level of trust in the authorities and the industry is traditionally low, a recent Fuji TV poll found that the Japanese' mistrust in the government skyrocketed: around 80 per cent of voters do not trust the government's information on the nuclear crisis and according to a Kyodo news agency poll only 1.3 per cent think Prime

Minister Kan was exercising sufficient leadership. Trust, however, is imperative if authorities want citizens to comply with official guidelines to keep order in the midst of an emergency.

Three fundamental errors

Overall, it is arguable that the Japanese government committed three fundamental errors in their handling of the event: formal organisation, message content, and the insufficient synchronisation of crisis management activity with crisis communication objectives.

Firstly, the formal organisation of the government's communication was slow and lacked coordination. TEPCO withheld information from both the government and the public. Only five days into the crisis did the government finally assemble a joint crisis management team consisting of TEPCO and government officials to access unprocessed information about the situation in the nuclear plant. Furthermore, individuals within or close to the government made contradictory comments.

Secondly, as far as message content is concerned, public authorities failed to communicate accurately and clearly. Information given out were not transparent. Overall, the sense was that the government was holding back information or intentionally keeping low their estimates when no data was available.

Thirdly, crisis management and crisis communication were not synchronised. Actions taken such as the several extensions of the evacuation radius from 2 km to 30 km were not considered in terms of the message that such actions send out (in this case the message was: "the situation is aggravating gradually by a factor of 15 and getting out of control").

Advanced Preparation Needed

The analysis of the Japanese government's mistakes allows three possible explanations. Either it had not planned in advance at all, or, despite having a plan, officials failed to implement the plan properly possibly due to inadequate training, or a combination of both factors.

Advanced preparation starts with the identification of risks. In the case of a country prone to serious natural disasters and heavily dependent on nuclear energy as Japan, a crisis scenario similar to the one experienced could have been easily identified. After the identification of a risk, a crisis communication plan needs to be drafted and officials trained. A pre-designed plan provides a guide for trained officials to organise well and communicate appropriately from the start of the crisis.

In Japan, if drawn along the lines of recommended best practices, such a plan would have stipulated the immediate centralisation of the communication by assembling a joint team of TEPCO and government officials. This would have allowed the government to overcome systemic difficulties and actively seek and access TEPCO's unprocessed data rather than depending on information from that company – after all, TEPCO has a history of systematically falsifying information and covering up difficulties in their plants.

Further, it would have prevented contradictory messages from being sent out during the first five days. The media could have been fed with accurate news continuously. If the flow of information is perceived as slow, the media may listen to less reliable sources which can cause confusion. In addition, trained staff would have known to react quickly, tell the truth, explain technical data to laymen, and harmonise crisis management and crisis communication. Altogether, the government's communication would have consolidated trust, and not led to the further loss that it suffered.

As crises hit sooner or later, advanced preparation is crucial to master the situation. Since each crisis differs in the challenges it poses, pre-designed communication plans do not provide answers to all questions that may come up in an emergency. However, advanced preparation does provide a plan as a point of orientation. It also empowers trained staff and leaders to act as versed crisis managers who know the principles of good crisis communication and who can take the necessary steps – steps that sometimes are counterintuitive. Finally, training and planning for any possible emergency increases sensitivity and enables those in charge to apply their knowledge creatively to unanticipated crises.

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