

# Crisis communication in organizations

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**Abstract** The paper is focused on the topic of crisis communication, primarily describing the theory of crisis communication and types of crises. Gro is a link between cultural influences on communication and conflict resolution, which again brings us back to crisis communication. Communication is a manifestation of culture - it is this statement that forms the impetus for this scientific contribution.

**Key words** Crisis communication, communication, cultural dimensions, conflict theory, Coombs SCCT model

## 1. CRISIS COMMUNICATION AND TYPES OF CRISES

Crisis communication has evolved in parallel with the perception of risk in human society, but it has experienced rapid development only in modern times. According to Vymětal (2009), crisis communication is the exchange of information between the competent leaders, organizations, the media, individuals or groups prior to the occurrence of an emergency, during its course and in the period after the emergency. The most important aspects include the content and form: the content is understood as the underlying situation of extraordinary character, the form is understood as the specific tools used in communication. However, it is necessary to take into account the possible pitfalls, the issue of confidence-building, and the questions of perception of risk. To prevent the communication crises, an organization develops its crisis communication strategy, which must be built on the principles of openness, credibility, competence and acceptance of different opinions (Miženková et al., 2010). Crisis communication in an organization can currently be seen as a subset of media communication. It is a way for the concerned the public to satisfy their need for information (Bednář – Jahodová, 2011), but it is also an integral part of one of the tools of marketing communication – public relations. This component is characteristic of the formation of public opinion and provision of information to the public, including through the media. When contacting the media – particularly in the long term – it is not appropriate to withhold negative information, but rather to apply the chosen strategy of crisis communication.

Crisis communication can be divided into external and internal according to the environment in which it takes place, but also according to the duration length. Public relations, be it with the customers, business partners, or the media, are mainly affected by external crisis communication, the proper management of which affects the overall image of the organization in the eyes of the general public. The communication crises, which differ in size and duration, can be divided into:

- *immediate crises* – the most feared ones, they occur so quickly and unexpectedly that there is little or no time for analysis and planning, for example, a plane crash, product poisoning, death of a key manager, earthquake, bomb threat or firearm assault by former employee etc. Sudden crises require a prior approval of senior management with the general plan to respond to such a crisis to avoid confusion, conflicts and delays.
- *emerging crises* – provide more time for analysis and planning, but they can break out suddenly after a longer boiling period. For example, this concerns the staff discontent and poor morale, sexual harassment in the workplace, substance abuse in the workplace etc. The key to mastering the emerging crises is to convince the top management to take corrective action before the crisis reaches a critical stage.
- *sustained crises* – persisting for months or even years despite all management efforts. The rumors or speculations are brought to the media or spread by the word of mouth, and cannot be rebutted by means of public relations.

The crisis communication in an organization is mainly concerned with optimizing the communication processes in crisis management not only with respect to the inner company climate but also the effects of the national and corporate cultures. With the advent of globalization, it is taken for granted that the national environment is intertwined by foreign companies and organizations with a different business and social culture, which can result in an internal or external conflict. The focus here is the functionality of the hierarchy of international organizations and the related level of their agility. In the recent years, agility has become a frequently discussed concept in organizational contexts. For this reason, technological innovation should go hand in hand with social innovation. The innovative

processes include the new forms of communication and cooperation. Social innovation begins with an activity that is needed to promote the modern working conditions for employees, such as the promotion of self-organization and more extensive freedom in the individual composition of work processes. On an intra-company level, this requires participatory and trust-based actions between the management and subordinates. These working conditions make it possible to use the innovation potential of employees of the organization with the active involvement of agile management.

The main function of the executives should be able to communicate – not only the “what” but also the “how” – because communication is one of the most important management tools to positively influence the subordinates (Rosenstiel et al., 2011, p. 325). An example is the examination of the state of management and communication in German companies, which was presented in the qualitative study of 226 executives, which shows that the use of agile management in practice is indeed necessary, but very difficult to achieve. As can be seen in the study on the level of efficiency and agility (www.hays.de), managers tend to concentrate more on traditional topics such as innovation, and their promotion of autonomy of the subordinates is insufficient (only 17%). A change of the existing working practices related to the constantly changing working environment first requires a certain degree of understanding, and even some mental bipolarity, in the executives: This means the use of the existing knowledge (exploitation) while concentrating on new knowledge (exploration). Organizational ambidexterity is understood as a cost-efficient and flexible response to rapid changes (Fojcik, 2015). However, a successful transformation depends on the persuasion of the process participants, which also includes the managers and their subordinates. The transformation is also blocked by other circumstances in the company, such as the reluctance of managers to change their existing style of management (61%), or frictions regarding the competitive mindset (26%) (www.hays.de). A strong, and especially generally accepted corporate culture supports the process of recognition of new management tools, however, its implementation is a gradual and difficult process in the clash of two cultures, which also needs to take intercultural interference into account.

Intercultural interference is understood as the transfer of cultural structures from the original culture to the equivalent structures in the foreign culture and vice versa. This relates to the structure of verbal and nonverbal communication, which may be incorrect and misleading in a foreign culture, and may lead to misunderstandings. Thus, intercultural interference disrupts the messages in social interaction in the transition from the sender from one cultural context to the recipient in the other.

Both cultures – national and corporate – are complex social phenomena. Certain cultures are only understood by their members. Foreign members must vigorously analyze it in order to understand the thinking, feelings and actions of its members. Acculturation processes in contact with another culture allow us to understand, or even adopt such a culture. The basic components of culture include the ideas, values, norms and attitudes that affect communication. They can be materialized through the description of attitudes and values of expression and deciphering of symbols and meanings to obtain a sufficient, comprehensive and a more valid image. For a better understanding of the origin, course and solution of organizational crises by means of crisis communication, we will try – from the perspective of transdisciplinary paradigms – to theoretically clarify particularly the crises caused by cultural interference between the national and corporate culture, and use examples from the German, Slovak, and Chinese (where appropriate) business culture to illustrate the concept.

## 2. CULTURAL ISSUES INFLUENCING THE EMERGENCE OF CONFLICT

The subsequent theoretical considerations on the causes and solutions of crisis communication are based on a logical reasoning in the general theory of culture, demonstrated in the models by Edward T. Hall (1990), and the specific models of cultural circumstances in organizations in the implicit organizational model presented by Geert Hofstede (2017), and the model of levels of corporate culture by Edgar H. Schein (2010) relating to the analysis of corporate culture.

The connotation of the concept “conflict” is negative, and it is associated with a negative impact on human health. Conflicts are necessary for an organization because they are the driving force and/or drive for its development. Conflicts in the workplace only result in personal growth if they are handled well by the individuals. When we notice the conflicts, we can analyze and adequately handle them. To have conflicts under control and stabilize them should be one of the key objectives of each organization that carries a conscious responsibility for the health of their staff.

The complexity of culture is also reflected in how people communicate in the conflict. In Germany, for example, the exchange of views is welcome and it is supported by the corporate culture by the application of the so-called healthy arguing culture (gesunde Streitkultur), but a quarrel at work in China is absolutely not tolerated in terms of national culture. This means that the legitimization function of culture allows the acceptance of certain conduct. Culture manifests itself in communication and communication is a management tool. A manager should not only have a clear idea of the content, but also the ways of communication, to preclude the emergence of negative reactions in the subordinates. An example of the communication-cultural paradox is the corporate culture value in Germany where the supervisor is expected to treat the subordinates equally, and the Slovak national culture where the great distance to power is deeply rooted and the supervisor is expected to maintain a certain distance, giving rise to cultural interference, which should eliminate the suggestions to optimize the crisis management communication processes.

According to Rosenstiel and Nerdinger (2011), social conflicts within and between the groups at work can be defined as positive or negative according to the relative scientific perspective. Organizational psychologists perceive the social conflicts between the people in economic practice rather negatively because a working man is the object of their research. The fact that conflicts are often burdensome means that they often reduce productivity and overall performance. Sociologists perceive social conflicts at work a little more positively because they see them through social systems and structures that are cleared in conflict resolution (von Rosenstiel et al., 2011, p. 305). Ngoh Tiong Tan (2012) defines conflict in the cultural context as follows: “*Conflict is a part of life and ... routinely deal with it, be it within a family, between people or groups, in organizations, or in the community. Differences are often the reason for conflict, though not necessarily. Diversity can also enrich relationships and communities. Cultural conflict and conflict resolution can present opportunities for change an interpersonal growth as well as enhance intergroup understanding*” (Tan, 2012, s. 128).

Various scientific disciplines, such as sociology, philosophy, psychology and anthropology, offer different interpretations of conflicts. The most veracious are the ones of psychological nature: conflicts arise because of the subjective perception of contradictions and take place in the people's minds and/or feelings (Hugo-Becker et

al., 2004, p. 113). In the course of communication, subconscious cognitive dissonance increases and manifests itself mostly nonverbally (facial expressions, gestures) or paraverbally (intensity and tenor of the voice), affecting subsequent social interaction.

Friedrich Glasl (2008) analyzed conflicts and crises. In his view, a social conflict involves the interaction of least two actants with irregularities in thinking, perception, feeling or actions in a way that at least one of them is appalled. The conflicts have three characteristics: 1) Non-compliance based on different values. 2) Personally touching – the emotional aspects of conflict. 3) Addressing the issue – points to an active, dynamic and expansive aspects of conflicts. The fact that conflicts have multiple actants (biased, observers, igniters, judges) makes them difficult to control (Glasl, 1994, p. 14).

Conflicts are inherent to human life, so in practical terms they can be regarded as normal and sometimes even necessary. Necessary because development and growth cannot be achieved without destroying and/or replacing the previous – this attitude, however, depends on the culture of the country. Furthermore, conflict situations cause burdensome feelings impacting, which have a negative impact on health, as statistically confirmed by numerous studies (Badura et al., 2010).

In recent decades we have noted huge changes in the companies due to the development and growth of the global market. The considerably more complex requirements for staff have opened the way for new and modern concepts of cooperation, which if not taken into account in crisis communication, may result in a further escalation of the conflicts.

## 2.1 New forms of cooperation as the cause of conflicts

### *Empowerment*

According to George Schreyögg (2008), empowerment is defined as empowering within which the employee is entitled to individual decisions and expected to act in his/her own initiative, foresight and readiness to take responsibility (Schreyögg, 2008, p. 228). This increases the need for information exchange and cooperation with others in the company. This form of cooperation must be solely based on the person's own will and not be enforced by corporate rules. Here, a certain degree of diversity of possible cooperations can be assumed because interpersonal relationships form and are formed by work situations. It can also be assumed that the extension of powers in the workplace by introducing empowerment and thereby reducing the hierarchical positions increases the potential for conflict arising from the collaboration. The organizations accumulate the main themes of human existence mostly in a hidden form, such as the desire for recognition, privileges and power – and also the fear of rejection or failure on the other hand.

### *Comparison with others*

The theory of social comparison is represented by Leon Festinger (1954) who dealt with cognitive dissonance in comparison with others. A person constantly compares himself/herself, either consciously or unconsciously, to others. His/her goals have an effect on who he/she compares to (Festinger, 1954). How social comparison unravels in the workplace? 1) communicatively, i.e. through statements and their content, and 2) symbolically, by means of status symbols. The outcome of social comparison with others leads to self-knowledge and/or own categorization by identifying the differences. Difference is followed by identity. It is natural that everyone is trying to win when comparing himself/herself with others (Klauer, 2008). However, social comparisons pave the way to internal conflicts because comparison may result in a personal

defeat. This may result in emotional dissonance, which is accompanied by negative feelings and manifests itself in communication (Watzlawick et al., 2011).

### *Emotional effects on humans*

Organizations are constantly exposed to changes and experts agree that only the most agile survive. Man is naturally seeking stability – and not change. Change can be associated with the fear of failure, rivalry or failure when being confronted by novelties. According to Ansfried B. Weinert (2004), even technological progress and competitiveness of the organization bring various changes. For an organization to respond more quickly on the market, a tendency of enterprises to narrow the hierarchical structures has been observed in Germany in the recent years. Of course, the breakdown of hierarchies increases the exclusivity of the leading positions in the organization. This situation promotes competitiveness and rivalry in the workplace. Hugo-Becker and Becker (2004) recognize that organizational decisions, e.g. allocation of hierarchical positions, bonuses or declaration of public recognition for the achievements of someone, can cause emotional reactions, such as envy, in other employees (Hugo-Becker et al., 2004, p. 145). But even the mergers or introduction of new technologies bring about changes in the corporate culture and a certain degree of stress among the employees who are constantly confronted with the loss of jobs, changes in the job positions or standards in the company (Weinert, 2004, p. 300).

A defiant reaction of the employees, the so-called reactance, is a motivational impetus for the internal rejection of the novelties, and is primarily manifested in process changes (Landes & Steiner, 2013, p. 732). If reactance grows to mass proportions in a company, there is only a small step to a crisis. Resistance can be demonstrated in the workplace in various modern ways, such as absenteeism, which is defined as frequent or unjustified absence at work. A much more serious problem for an organization is the so-called presenteeism, which is defined as working while sick. When a person appears in the workplace and is unfit for work, he/she has lower productivity and makes more mistakes. Low concentration in the workplace often corresponds with dissonant human relations (Aronsson et al., 2000). Einarsen (1999) highlights the need to analyze the dimension of long-term psychological pressure and its permanent social consequences for the individual.

## 2.2 The cultural mode of conflict resolution

Communication is the basis for the dissemination of culture and cultural traditions, and conflict resolution depends not only the relevant technique, but also on the culture. Among others, culture also has the “legitimation” function, i.e. the cultural modes can be used to resolve and overcome conflicts. In other words, a given culture requires us to behave in a certain way. According to Hofstede (2005), culture is the collective programming of the mind. For example, rivalry is not desired in the Chinese collectivist culture, and therefore it is handled indirectly. The semantic meaning of competitiveness is “special admiration”. Chinese culture is forcing the Chinese employees to transform the perceived rivalry in the course of communication into polite or even flattering words. In the Confucian collectivist culture of the country it serves to protect the speakers from conflicts (at least outwardly), with harmony at the forefront. In contrast, the German individualist culture requires a direct and open communication in the workplace. The reason is the thinking and actions in the companies, which aptly illustrates the Hofstede implicit organization model in Fig. 1.

Fig. 1: Implicit organization model

	Small power distance	Large power distance
Small uncertainty avoidance	Market (Denmark, Sweden, USA)	Family (Slovakia, China)
Great uncertainty avoidance	Machine (Germany)	Pyramid (Japan, Russia)

Source: own processing according to Hofstede et al., 2005, p. 243

The figure shows the typical behavior in organizations as a result of cultural differentiation. Slovakia is in the field of “family” where values other than those in Germany are dominant. Germany is in the field of “machine”. In the family, values such as harmony and acceptance of opinion of senior members (or the head of the family – the boss in the organizational context) are important, which presumes the avoidance of conflict. On the other hand, the most important aspect of a machine is that it works, and this is only possible if the failures or breakdowns (in the context of organizational conflicts) are immediately addressed.

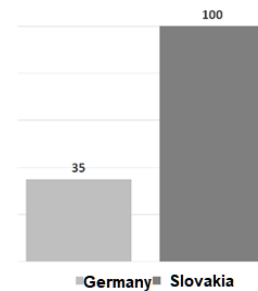
Edgar H. Schein (2010) postulates that the view of the corporate culture allows us to better understand the arising conflicts and even “understand” the rebellion against changes (Schein, 2010, p. 178). Karl Eibl (2009) asks the following question from the evolutionary/biological perspective: When a person cannot go beyond his/her genetic disposition, i.e. when he/she is limited by nature, can these shortcomings be compensated by culture? Perhaps the answer is a “yes”: by means of communication. Communication is an anthropological constant, but anthropological constants also include aggressiveness and conflicts. Communication as part of the culture is essential and indispensable for conflict resolution.

Eibl (2009) points to the need to look at culture as a mediator between nature and the individual. Culture is forcing an individual into a corset: If there were no culture, each individual could freely use and satisfy his/her affectations, inclinations and motivations. From the perspective of nature, human beings have a tendency to conflict because of the perpetual struggle for scarce resources, such as the leadership positions in the workplace. Therefore, a person as an individual has an inherent and continuous conflict with the culture. The existence of conflicts is not a coincidence.

During the evolution of human socialization a hierarchy was used, which helps people to solve conflicts. A hierarchy ensures social order in each culture (Happel 2017). Examples include the considerations of the Chinese philosopher Confucius (orig. Kong Fu Ze): seniors stand above juniors; men over women; fathers over sons; older brothers over younger; officers over farmers; bosses over employees, and these notions shape the Chinese culture to this day (Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005, p. 64). In countries such as Slovakia, Germany and China the relations between superiors and subordinates in the workplace differ and they are determined by national culture. In all three countries, the hierarchy is present, but manifests itself in a different form (Stempler et al., 2005).

The hierarchical organization is related to power – the privilege associated with a certain position in the structure of corporate hierarchy. Hofstede (2005) identified six cultural dimensions in the structure of an organization, which may be used to measure the national dimension by Power Distance, and express it numerically. The highest possible score on the scale is 100, and it provides information on the dependency of relationships in the workplace (Hofstede et al., 2005).

Fig. 2: National cultural dimension - Power Distance (PDI)



Source: <https://www.hofstede-insights.com/product/compare-countries/>, accessed on 22.11.2018

Fig. 2 shows the situation in Slovakia and Germany in Power Distance (Power Distance Index), i.e. to what extent is inequality in the distribution of power accepted in society. A high score on the scale indicates that the less powerful individuals accept the unequally distributed power (Slovakia = 100 out of 100). A low score indicates that power is evenly distributed (Germany = 35 out of 100). In Germany, a supervisor is likely to be perceived as a “primus inter pares” (first among equal). This means that he/she takes into account the opinions of his/her subordinates, and defines himself/herself on their level – as their coach. And adjusts his/her communication accordingly. It can be inferred from the above that hierarchy is merely functional in the German culture and it is not an instrument of demonstration of power in the workplace (Mochtarova 2000, p. 23). Taking into account the implicit model of organization it can be concluded that the “machine” mentality in the German corporate culture is congruent with the behavior of the executives – readiness to resolve conflicts without emotions. When organizational changes are introduced, such as empowerment in German companies, the implementation of this form of cooperation in Slovakia is almost impossible and a conflict between the Slovak managers and their subordinates may easily erupt. The cultural values stand in the way – both on behalf of the superiors (possible reactance regarding the loss and/or limitation of power) and subordinates (possible reactance to assume the responsibility that has been so far carried by the superior). One does not perceive his/her own culture, and is possibly “blind” to his/her cultural eye. Only a confrontation with another different culture provides a differentiated view of his/her own (Thomas, 1993, p. 381). The Slovak managers operating under the German corporate culture are facing a considerable challenge to reconcile the conflicting values and communicate them optimally.

Communication reflects the spirit of society and the behavior of an individual is largely affected by his/her cultural circumstances (Gunkel, 2011, p. 380). Dowling et al. (2008) puts a great emphasis on the so-called “cultural shock” in the context of internationalist companies – the attitudes, values and norms are very different between the two cultures: „An important characteristic of culture is that it is so subtle a process that one is not always conscious of its effect on values, attitudes and behaviors. One usually has to be confronted with a different culture in order to fully appreciate this effect“ (Dowling et al., 2008, s. 10).

People’s expectations on the environment and society are closely linked to communication and culture. These expectations vary depending on the cultural context they originated in. In the international companies, the national values of their subsidiaries in the country of operation are dominant (Karten, 2004, p. 72). The ideas and expectations of German parent companies regarding the communication in the company may therefore be different from the



ideas and expectations of its subsidiaries in Slovakia. To enrich the negotiation skills between the two countries the cultural interference in communication needs to be identified, which contributes to the optimization of communication processes between the trading partners.

### 3. COMMUNICATION AS AN EXPRESSION OF CULTURE

According to Hofstede et al. (2005) culture is learned and not inherited, dynamically self-modifying and not statically stable, and always collective, yet lived at the individual level. Culture directs the collective behavioral norms, which are customary in social intercourse.

According to Edgar H. Schein's model (2010), each corporate culture is incorporated into the national culture of the country of operation. This means that based on the assumptions and beliefs of its founders, executives and employees, the company reflects the deeper assumptions of national culture (own translation: Schein, 2010, p. 60). According to Schein, corporate culture can be seen as follows: "The culture of a group can now be defined as a pattern of shared basic assumptions that was learned by a group as it solved its problems of external adaptation and internal integration, that has worked well enough to be considered valid and, therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to those problems" (Schein, 2004, s. 17).

Fig. 3: Three levels of corporate culture

Artifacts	Organizational structures and processes (as visible symbols, but only decipherable through knowledge about the organization)
Publicly promoted values	Strategies, aims, philosophy (on the level of concepts and self-expression of the enterprise)
Elementary unpronounced presuppositions	Non-conscious but generally accepted beliefs, perceptions, thoughts and feelings (source of values and source of actions)

Source: (own processing from Schein, 2010, p. 31)

Fig. 3 shows the level of corporate culture, which point to its depth, width and stability. Culture cannot be easily changed, but it can be observed and partially deciphered and interpreted, however, it is impossible to fully understand it (Schein, 2010, p. 40).

According to Neubauer (2003), corporate culture is a "set of shared ideas, values and norms that have been developed to overcome the problems in an organization ... and that have proven so effective that they are passed on to the new members of the organization to make them perceive, think, feel and act accordingly" (own translation from Neubauer 2003, p. 22). This transfer to the new members of the organization, subject to acceptance, ensures their social compatibility.

### 3.1 Cultural dimensions

Cultural dimensions and standards aim to highlight the stereotypes in the behavior of one culture, diversity of behavior in different cultures, their understanding and compliance thereto. In the following section, we will present two empirical studies on culture: Hofstede's and Trompenaar's.

A. Cultural dimensions are aptly described by Hofstede (2005) in his organizational model in Fig. 4.

Fig. 4: Cultural dimensions according to Hofstede



Source: <https://www.hofstede-insights.com/product/compare-countries/>

#### Power distance

The Power Distance cultural dimension shows us to what degree society expects or accepts the diversity in its institutions and organizations. According to Gunkel (2011, p. 381), this dimension refers to the degree of centralization of decision-making, which means that the countries with a large Power Distance expect centralized decisions – in contrast, the countries with a small power distance are typical for the acceptance of decentralized decisions.

Slovakia shows the highest score in the Power Distance dimension as a nation (Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005, p. 43). The chief executive has a dominant position in the workplace and the subordinates accept it. On the other hand, a great Power Distance also brings a certain degree of responsibility of the chief executive for his/her subordinates. Hofstede's Power Distance can be critically interpreted through a deeper insight into the source of this power: it is political power, the power of information, or rather family relations or connections?

#### Individualism vs. collectivism

This dimension refers to the degree of preference to take care of oneself and his/her immediate family, or to commit to a greater team of people or close or more distant family members. In a work scenario, it can be seen that the employees who prefer individualistic values are more successful in an individualist work tasks, and on the other hand, the employees preferring collectivist values are more successful in teamwork.

Individualism and collectivism are the two sides of the same coin: if individualism prevails, collectivism is low. Individualism manifests itself through own decisions without consulting others, by living the preferred lifestyle regardless of others, but also by taking full responsibility for own life. Collectivism is characterized by following the group norms, such as the family contexts and delegation of responsibility for oneself to the church, faith or employer. In collectivist cultures, the avoidance of social conflicts due to the possible loss of protection of the group as a result of the conflict. This aspect should be taken into account in the dissertation project when making proposals for optimizing the communication processes.

#### *Masculinity vs. femininity*

In the countries with prevalent masculine values in the national dimension the traits such as the ability to enforce one's views, competitiveness and materialism, are esteemed and cherished. In contrast, in the countries with feminine values, interpersonal relationships and the quality of life prevail. In the masculine culture workplaces, it is manifested through a strong emphasis on the security associated with financial expression and interesting work activities. In contrast, the feminine cultures prefer the values such as human relations and working conditions.

#### *Uncertainty avoidance*

This dimension refers to the degree of seriousness, which society gives to the values such as stability, security and prognosis. It is reflected on the organizational level in the countries with a high score in this national dimension by establishing formal rules for controlling and structuring the work activities. This also includes operational tasks and responsibility. Avoidance of uncertainty reflects the extent of the necessity to control the future. A high degree of uncertainty avoidance focuses on general rules, and the laws are accepted. A change is seen as a threat with associated risks. In contrast, a low degree of uncertainty avoidance views changes as a chance and not a risk. In countries with low uncertainty avoidance people frequently change employers and professions.

#### *Short-term vs. long-term orientation*

This cultural dimension expresses the amount of planning in society. In the short-term orientation, the past and present is important – in the long-term orientation, the future, traditions and rituals are important. In the work context, it is manifested through the nature of employment relationships: The cultures with a short-term orientation are focused on short-term results, and cultures with a long-term orientation are focused on building good business relationships, market position, and especially sustainability.

#### *Modulation of affects*

This national dimension expresses the range, i.e. the ability to coordinate impulsive behavior. It shows to what extent it is acceptable to openly show human emotions. A low score on the scale indicates a very strong control of human emotions in public. China can be taken as an example – the non-verbal aspects, such as facial expressions and gestures, are almost absent in communication. In public, it is reflected through prudent and discreet demeanor (Hofstede et al., 2005, 2017).

#### B. Cultural dimensions according to Trompenaars

Trompenaars accommodates culture as a dynamic process of solutions to human problems in three areas: human relations, understanding of time and nature. Based on the works of Hofstede and Hall, he developed the theory of analysis of cultural differences. In the 1980s, Trompenaars conducted a study with 15,000 employees in various hierarchies in 28 countries (Trompenaars, 1993) and extended it in the early 1990s to add further 15,000 questionnaires. He identified five cultural dimensions, however, these were deviating from Hofstede. These values were aptly summarized by Gunkel (2011, p. 385):

#### *Universalism vs. particularism*

Universalism refers to the social code. It is assumed that what is good and right should be defined and used at all times. Particularistic values are concentrated on the use of specific connections and relationships - social code is not relevant here. Therefore, particularistic culture do not recognize one set way only, but they are tolerant to other approaches, and those related to families stand at the forefront.

#### *Individualism vs. communitarianism*

This dimension explains the extent to which individuals are perceived as members of a group. Individualistic cultures prefer the ideas and development of the individual while the communitarian cultures favor the community with the possibility of developing many.

#### *Neutrality vs. emotionality*

The neutrality vs. emotionality cultural dimension shows the point in which emotion is expressed in social interaction. In neutral cultures, the interpersonal relationships are therefore more objective and distanced.

#### *Specificity vs. diffusion*

Diffuse cultures prefer real personal relationships in the workplace. In the specific cultures, the relations between business partners depend on the situation and are mostly regulated by contracts.

#### *Achievement vs. ascription*

In cultures where performance is valued, reports on the employee's previous successes are preferred. In cultures where ascription and lineage play an important role, one's status is secured rather through tribal relations, social status, gender or age.

Trompenaars later added two more cultural dimensions to the above: *Seriality vs. Parallelism (Sequential time vs. synchronous time)*, which reflect the treatment of time in a particular culture, i.e. events occurring sequentially/consecutively or synchronously/concurrently. For example, the work processes are sequential in Germany and simultaneous in China. *Internal vs. outer direction* reflects the treatment of nature, and especially the interference into the environment either through control or cooperation (Gunkel, 2011, p. 385).

#### C. Cultural dimensions according to Hall

A research into nonverbal communication in connection with intercultural management was conducted by Edward T. Hall who had expert interviews with over 180 senior executives over a period of two decades, seeking an answer to the research question: How much communication is enough? Given the communication context, he distinguishes between low and high cultural context (Hall et al., 1990, p. 6). In the high-context culture, everything related to the unspoken moods and gestures associated with the communication process is essential in addition to the spoken word. In contrast, in the low-context culture, it is necessary to communicate more extensively and even express the moods and gestures because the relevant society is not collective, and it requires a deeper explanation for the recipient to better understand the message. Explicit communication is thus based on the division between work and private relationships (Gunkel, 2011, p. 380). Similarly, Hall identifies the idea of space and time as cultural dimensions that vary depending on the western/northern and eastern/southern mentality. In the western cultures, the notion of time is linear, much is planned in advance, and the set time is respected. In contrast, in Eastern cultures, time flexibility and personal contacts are preferred, and timeliness does not play a very important role. Hall and Hall (1990) distinguish between western and eastern mentality in the workplace, which is demonstrated in the speed and manner of exchange of information as follows: *"In high-context cultures, interpersonal contacts take precedence over everything else; wherever people are spatially involved with each other, information flows freely. In business, executives do not seal themselves off behind secretaries and closed doors; in fact in Japan senior executives may even share offices so that each person knows as much about the entire base of operations as possible, and in France an executive will have ties to a centrally located bureau chief to keep a finger on the pulse of information flow. In these cultures most people are already highly*

*contexted and therefore don't need to be briefed in much detail for each transaction ..."* (Hall et al., 1990, p. 23)

### 3.2 Culture, values and conflicts

According to Neubauer (2003, p. 63), values are a normative and moral anchor in an individual that guide his/her behavior in a particular situation – personal values decide what is right and wrong. Frey et al. (2016, p. 314) describe the problem between the mediation of values and their anchoring in human behavior, which can eventually lead to internal conflicts in an individual. The conflicts surface through communication, and they lead to disharmony in social interaction. There is a certain discrepancy between the proclamation of values and actual behavior, that is, between words and actions. Nevertheless, people are trying to behave according to their values and, following Frey (2016), certain variables complicate and/or aggravate the transformation between the professed values and actual behavior.

The values that are valid in one culture vary from those in other cultures, which is reflected in behavior. Intercultural competence is one of the key competences for the employees of international corporations – a knowledge of what values are preferred in which culture in order to adequately approach the other mentality. Through sensible perception, intercultural competence helps us to convey this knowledge into an adequate behavior towards the foreign culture (Frey et al., 2016, p. 314).

#### *Conflicts between the communication aim and professed values*

People are in permanent conflict with themselves because the values overlap in communication, so there is a conflict between the transparent and diplomatic communication. It can be concluded that the values are mutually exclusive in their extreme forms. A paradoxical situation occurs, for example, when someone truly appreciates another person but cannot always communicate everything honestly and openly. This means that the values are variable and dependent on the interlocutor and the situation – sometimes they are foregrounded or they remain on the periphery (Frey et al., 2016, p. 315).

In the organizational context, this can be to some extent understood as a micropolitical procedure, which has a rather negative effect on social interaction.

Conflicts in an organization may also be formed because of the inconsistency between self-evaluation and evaluation of others. It can be explained by the social phenomenon of observation of the proclaimed vs. lived values, which results in hybrid behavior in the workplace. Hybrid behavior means to behave differently – according to the situation. A high percentage of employees always think higher of themselves than the others (Frey et al., 2016, p. 315). As a result, the result of self-assessment is not identical to the result of the assessment of others. If an executive judges himself/herself as credible but the subordinates rate him/her as unreliable, this situation may be interpreted as variable: who the executive interacted with and under what conditions (alone or in the presence of the team). To better assess the behavior of others, one needs to be familiar with these circumstances.

The “living” of certain values is often enforced only when people feel they are being observed. From a psychological standpoint, it can be concluded that anonymity is a kind of protective equipment against the sanctions, and persons are able to act otherwise, i.e. far beyond the definition of their own values. Empirical studies show that people act more egoistically knowing their behavior remains hidden – and only if their behavior and/or actions is clearly revealed

do they act according to the values (Diener 1979; Zimbardo 1970, quoted from Frey et al., 2016, p. 317).

The living of own values is threatened when, for example, a culture of individual successes prevails in the organizational context, in which the stronger wins. This particularly concerns getting even greater power and strategic use of the situations to enforce individual goals – even when the circumstances damage others. There are corporate cultures in which the tactics of micropolitical negotiations are supported in order to increase the productivity through the rivalry of colleagues. These socialization processes in the workplace cause a discrepancy in living the values: it is not possible to live the values, such as fairness or cooperation, in the workplace even though these values are preferred private lives. It can be explained by the defense mechanisms in the context of interactions where people often react by intentionally betraying their own values. The need for self-defense is manifested in reciprocal practices “tit for tat”, the idea of which is originally based on a positive cooperative strategy in organizational contexts (Axelrod 2005, quoted from Frey et al., 2016, p. 317). However, this practice contributes to the reduction of cognitive dissonances by legitimizing the (sometimes selfish) behavior if only a reaction is given.

## 4. CRISIS STRATEGY AND COMMUNICATION – AN INSTRUMENT OF CONFLICT RESOLUTION IN AN ORGANIZATION

So how should we prevent and deal with the crisis in an organization that arises suddenly and unexpectedly? We are aided by the crisis strategy and a previously prepared emergency plan. This should include a procedure for the affected and interested parties, which includes the role and function of a spokesperson, other presenters, and competent persons from senior management of the company, and/or the main representatives of the office, institution etc. When the crisis communication is also viewed as an integral part of relationships with the public, it is recommended that the following 5 steps discussed at length by Svoboda (2009) be respected.

1. Analyze the crisis situation.
2. Prepare a detailed plan for crisis communication.
3. Choose appropriate topic presenters.
4. Choose suitable communication channels.
5. Provide training to presenters to cope with the crisis.

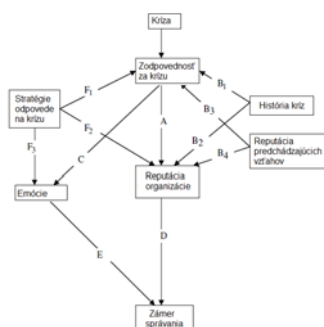
### 4.1 Coombs SCCT model in the process of crisis communication

There are many different theories and models that can be used in a crisis. We decided to further describe the process based on the Coombs model (Situational Crisis Communication Theory - SCCT). The Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) is an experimentally tested analytical framework for the study of crisis communication. It consists of three main parts: typology of crisis situations, typology of response strategies to the crisis, and the mechanism for adaptation of the response strategies to a crisis (Coombs, 2006). It allows us to determine how to maximize the protection of the reputation and good name of an organization by means of crisis communication (Coombs, 2007a). The theory describes how the key aspects of the crisis affect the perception of the organization's reputation. Based on this, the theory formulates empirically tested recommendations to select the most appropriate response strategy to the crisis (see Fig. 5).

This theory can be applied to any type of organization. The theory of crisis communication suggests that an effective emergency response depends on the assessment of the situation and the

associated threats to reputation (Holdsworth, 2014). SCCT understands “reputation” as an aggregate score that the stakeholders give based on how the organization meets their expectations based on its previous behavior (Coombs, 2007b).

Fig. 5 Model of crisis situation according to Situational Crisis Communication Theory



Source: Coombs, T. W. 2007a. Ongoing Crisis Communication: Planning, Managing, and Responding, Second Edition, Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications.

The crisis poses a threat to the reputation of an organization as it affects a wide range of stakeholder groups and gives them a reason to think low of the organization. The concept of reputational capital is the conceptualization of reputation and its threats, i.e. the rate of quality of the relationships that the organization built with its stakeholders and the opinion they have of the company and its brand (Fombrun – Van Riel, 2004). An organization with a solid original reputation and/or higher initial amounts of reputational capital has more reputational capital to spend in a crisis than an organization with a neutral or bad reputation before the onset of the crisis, and therefore it manages to overcome the crisis more easily. The negative reputation of an organization leads to negative behavior intentions of the stakeholders against it.

The first step in this theory is to identify the type of crisis. The STTC provides twelve types of crises divided into three groupings, which vary by the degree of responsibility that the stakeholders attribute to an organization for the crisis:

1. Victim – the organization is seen as a victim of the crisis and has little or no attributed responsibility and mild reputational threats.
2. Accident – the crisis is seen as a random event, i.e. the actions of the organization were unintentional, and only minimal responsibility is attributed to the organization.
3. Intention – includes the crises that the organization could have prevented and are caused by a deliberate immoral and/or illegal conduct with a strong attribution of responsibility (Coombs – Holladay, 2002).

The second step is to define the response strategies to the crisis. Their aim is to correct the reputation of the organization, limit the negative impact of the crisis and avoid negative behavioral intentions (Coombs, 2007b). These strategies describe what the crisis staff should do and communicate in response to the crisis. They are sorted according to the degree of acceptance of responsibility by the organization, and they are also grouped into three groups: deny crisis response strategies, diminish crisis response strategies and rebuild crisis response strategies. These primary strategies are complemented by secondary supporting strategies:

A. Primary crisis response strategies:

1. Strategies to deny the responsibility:

- a) *Attack the accuser* – confrontation of persons or groups claiming that the organization is facing a problem. The response may include a threat of legal action.
- b) *Denial* – a claim that the crisis does not exist, or that the organization did not carry out the actions leading to the crisis.
- c) *Transfer of responsibility (scapegoat)* – a person or group outside the organization is blamed for the crisis.

2. Strategies to diminish the responsibility:

- a) *Excuse* – denial of the organization’s intention to cause damage or a claim that it could not have influenced the circumstances that led to the crisis.
- b) *Justification* – an effort to minimize the perceived damage caused by the crisis.

3. Strategies to rebuild trust:

- a) *Compensation* – an organization offers money or other compensation to the victims of the crisis.
- b) *Apology* - is divided into full or partial. Full apology constitutes the acceptance of responsibility for the crisis, an expression of concern and regret over the crisis. Partial apology is only an expression of interest to address the crisis and show regret over the events. The selection of either variant depends on the ensuing legal response.

B. Secondary crisis response strategies:

1. Strategies to bolster reputation:

- a) *Reminder* - a reminder of past good works of the organization.
- b) *Ingratiation* - recognizing the contribution of the stakeholders to resolve the crisis.
- c) *Victimage* - the stakeholders are reminded that the organization is a victim of the crisis (Coombs, 2007a).

In addition to the rules for determining the content of crisis response SCCT also provides advice on its form. These can be summarized in a few concise rules. The initial response to the crisis must come as quickly as possible. The response must be factually accurate and consistent between the spokespersons of the organization. Public safety must be a top priority. SCCT also recommends using all available information channels for the organization to express interest and/or sympathy for the victims of the crisis (Coombs, 2007c).

#### 4.2 The role of management in crisis communication

The organizations have been recently subject to the requirement for the so-called agility and agile management that can flexibly respond to crisis situations. Agility is seen in the organizational context as an essential factor for maintaining competitiveness and survival of the organization. According to Hofert (2016), agile organizations are demonstrably significantly more successful than the non-agile ones. Agility is understood as speed, flexibility and proactive adaptation to change. The ever-accelerating development of new technologies and digitization increases the complexity and uncertainty in enterprises (Hofert 2016). According to Nowotny (2016, p. 62), agility means anticipating change, generating confidence, initiating activities and liberalizing thinking. An agile mindset should be the



best starting point: away from profitable thinking (Shareholder Value) and closer to meaningfulness (Corporate Social Responsibility), away from hierarchical structures and closer to the network of contacts – and in terms of management philosophy – away from controlling and closer to empowerment, strategically away from long-term planning and closer to flexible testing –and in terms of communication – away from closeness and closer to transparency (Nowotny, 2016, p. 364).

Using the qualitative study conducted in 2016 in 15 organizations of various sizes through semi-structured interviews with 45 executives from management boards, human resources and specialist departments, the four main aspects defining agility were defined: 1) speed, 2) adaptation, 3) customer focus and 3) mobility (orig. Agiles Mindset). This last aspect is based on mutual respect in social interaction between the superiors and inferiors, and vigorous communication at the same level ([www.haufe.de](http://www.haufe.de)). Agile organizations require their employees to implement competencies such as self-management, learning, collaboration and anticipation. These requirements are based on the high degree of autonomy of employees. The role of personnel marketing is to display these values of agile organizations to hire only those employees whose personality allows working in agile environments. This means that expertise is not as important in agile organizations because it can be quickly compensated by training (quoted from Doege et al., 2019, p. 80). Also, the development of employees in agile organizations needs to take into account the degree of maturity of employees (e.g. is the employee a graduate or a person with 5 or 20 years of experience). Hierarchy is virtually absent, or if present, it is only reflected on one level of management. The most important component is interaction in the workplace, i.e. exchange of information among the colleagues, which is supported by retrospective. Hofert (2016, p. 105) understands retrospective as a moderated ex-post analysis of the work processes in accordance with the principle that every opinion is important and everyone gets a say. The establishment of such behavior in the corporate culture can be achieved through regular staff training on topics such as communication, conflicts, provision and receipt of feedback, decisions and cooperation (Hofert, 2016). If the executives embrace this agile approach to solving the crisis in an organization, there is a high chance that the crisis will be resolved effectively and for the benefit of all persons concerned.

## 5. SUMMARY

Globalization and digitization brings many challenges, including those related to communication. To ensure optimum communication, cooperation based on contextual thinking and actions is of key importance. A change of the cultural environment towards a more open and transparent communication and cooperation is decisive in this context (Mersiowsky et al., 2019, p. 328). When there are frictions between the highly normative standardized and flexible localized business culture, the aim of crisis communication is to identify the cultural interference components and incorporate the methods to reduce it into the emergency communication strategy.

The actual intercultural competence, such as the ability for isomorphic attribution (to know how to put oneself in the situation as it is experienced by the interlocutor), is not sufficient when the cooperation concerns international partners without feedback. If the communication flows do not reflect cultural sensitivity, they are not working properly, and cooperation without a conflict is not possible. Top management should also be prepared to deal with crisis situations resulting from a conflict of cultures. It can be assumed that incompatible cultural values can lead to cultural interference. Failure of adequate treatment of the leaders in a subsidiary by senior management – manifested by the lack of (inter)cultural sensibility –

can have unpleasant consequences for the enterprise: If a Slovak executive is compelled to enforce the corporate values from a foreign culture, which are potentially incompatible with the national values in Slovakia, it can result in a workplace crisis.

The use of the above theories and models in Slovakia could contribute to the optimization of communication processes in order to mitigate the impact of interaction risk factors at an international workplace.

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