Crisis Communication in an Internal Conflict: A Social Constructionist Perspective

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the process of communication during a crisis between family members in a private organisation. Using the perspective of social constructivist theory, this study describes the communication dynamics among disputing parties as well as the stakeholders. Twelve in-depth interview transcripts were analysed using a pattern matching method based on an interpretive case study a conflict involving the Royal Palace of Surakarta. The findings suggested that communication during the crisis was inclined to be dominated by the disputing parties while stakeholders were relatively passive. Additionally, disputing parties used different responses to carry out communication with stakeholders. Since this study focused only on a single major case rather than on multiple cases, the characteristics of crisis were not explored nor could the findings be generalised. Therefore, further studies which involve multiple cases are required. Social constructivism in managing an organisational crisis is vital as crisis should be addressed appropriately since it represents the construction of perceptions among the members of the organisation. Therefore, communication between both parties should be strategic, instead of passive where it is taken for granted.

Keywords: Conflict, crisis communication, family members, responses, social constructivism, private organisation

INTRODUCTION

The Royal Palace of Surakarta Hadiningrat has underwent many changes after King Paku Buwono (PB) XII passed away in 2004. In particular, the absence of a successor to the throne led to an internal crisis within the royal family.

The conflict arose when two half-brothers who were the king's sons claimed the throne. The conflict continued when the older brother was crowned as the King Paku Buwono (PB) XIII and appointed his younger brother as Maha Patih or the deputy king. However, the siblings and half-siblings of the new king rejected the inauguration of the deputy king. Since that, the prolonged conflict turned into a serious crisis in which the King PB XIII decided to abdicate.

The crisis attracted a lot of attention. Several mediations were carried out by both the local and central governments, but to no avail. In addition, the media reported that the crisis, a shame, ruined the reputation of the palace, while at the same time it increased tourist arrivals who were curious about the power tussle.

The crisis was considered devastating to the image of the palace and it also threatened the well-being of individuals and families, the viability of organisations, and the stability of communities (Seeger, Ulmer, Novak, & Sellnow, 2005). Furthermore, it affected the organisation's operations and its reputation as well as of its stakeholders. Studies on crisis management have focused on various contexts of management and internal organisation (Anderson, 2012; Romenti & Valentini, 2010), health issues (Seeger, Reynolds, & Sellnow, 2009), and natural disasters (Sellnow & Seeger, 2001; Spence, Lachlan, Burke, & Seeger, 2007).

Primary source of data for this study is in-depth interviews with selected insiders and outsiders of the palace. A crisis communication model was used to discuss the situation affecting Royal Palace of Surakarta. It offered a different perspective from the conventional study of crisis communication. The aim of this study was to define crisis communication from the perspectives of insiders and outsiders of The Royal Palace of Surakarta.

METHODS

This research uses a qualitative case study. This enables the researcher to gather data from various sources and to meet that of Bexter and Jack (2008). Data for the study was obtained from in-depth interviews, field observations, and document review.

To answer the research questions, the study analysed transcripts of 12 interviews (with four royal family members, four Abdi dalem (servants and retainers), and four journalists). Each interview lasted approximately 1.5 hours. The informants were selected using purposive and snowball sampling technique. The study used embedded, single-case design as communication process with sub-units of communication crisis analysis from the perspectives of both internal and external stakeholders.

According to Yin (2003), a case study design requires prior development of theoretical propositions to guide data collection and analysis. All of the interviews were coded and analysed using patterns matching. Subsequently, researchers tested the data coding and its sources for their consistency.

RESULTS

In an organisation, communication is a complex and continuous process which involves organisational members and stakeholders through verbal, nonverbal, digital, or written/textual in order to create, maintain, and change the organisation (Keyton, 2005). In this study, communication occurred among conflicting parties and also between the conflicting parties and other stakeholders (internal and external).

The internal crisis taking place in the Royal Palace of Surakarta intensified crisis communications between its internal and stakeholders. However, it appeared without any prior planning for the organisation. In this uncertain condition, good organisational response was expected by the community and other stakeholders. Indecisive response would not be tolerated as it tarnishes the reputation of the organisation (Reynolds & Seeger, 2005).

When a crisis occurs, communication is conducted in several forms, although there is no guarantee they can solve the crisis. First, each party wants to influence public opinion. The internal and external stakeholders are aware of the negative consequences of the crisis, hence, they want to provide information based on their perspective. Therefore, communication with stakeholders is important to deliver certain messages.

Second, the disputing parties usually prefer to resolve the internal crisis within the family. Although the findings indicate that the motivation to solve the crisis is relatively low, it is an important element in crisis communication. When the motivation is low, then the impulse to resolve the conflict is relatively low. Third, disputes occur due to support of other parties outside the Royal Palace of Surakarta against one of the disputing parties. The outcome depends on the strength and influence of one party against the other.

Communication with Internal Stakeholder

Communication with internal stakeholder involved communication among individuals or groups of disputing parties, or with Abdi dalem. In general, the communication process occurring inside the palace was slow and passive. This fact could be seen from several elements such as intensity, dynamics, forms of communication, and impacts of communication.

However, the dialogue was rarely carried out by the internal family of the Royal Palace of Surakarta. It was also consistent with information given by informants. They claimed that special dialogue to discuss crisis resolution was non-existent. Both Abdi dalem and the king's family claimed there was dialogue at the beginning of the crisis, but it encountered obstacles and was never re-scheduled.

> *"…It is difficult to resolve this crisis because each party has its own perspective. We pray for a patience and a time resolution of the conflict)".*
>
> (Internal family member)

". The problem is this is a closed family-run organisation and managed by children and assisted by relatives and Abdi dalem) ... So, the key is in the king's sons".

(Journalist)

Dialogue is the most effective form of communication to resolve the crisis. It has a special and significant role since it facilitates and creates new opportunities for appropriate communication (Schein, 1993). Dialogue is a two way communication that includes negotiation, compromise, bargaining, and problem-solving to bring about changes to the organisation and stakeholders (Lee, 2009).

"The discussion among the family members was difficult due to several obstacles".

(Journalist)

"At that time, we did not have an opportunity to discuss this matter with the government about possible reconciliation".

(Internal family member)

"The mediation proves that President was intervening in this issue. Therefore, we were worried as well"

(Internal family member)

There were diverse communication forms taking place in the Royal Palace of Surakarta. Formal communication in a hierarchical form which is from the king to his people ceased during the crisis. The king did not have power to provide information and to communicate with his younger siblings, which was unlike the in the previous era. In fact, King PB XIII was not even accepted by the Dewan Adat as the eligible king.

Communications between the disputing parties in fact, had different dynamics with the communication between the disputing parties and Abdi dalem. Contrary to the communication between the disputing parties, communication with Abdi dalem was normal.

Informants from Abdi dalem admitted that they were rarely invited to attend official meetings to discuss the situation. In addition, they also rarely obtained official information regarding what they should do. However, the discussion about crisis frequently occurred in informal situations. In informal context in face-to-face communication, the children of King Paku Buwono (PB) XII used to express their feelings or views related to the dispute among them, although the information was not specific.

"..They sometimes share their feelings to abdi dalem who works every day in the palace"

(Abdi dalem)

This informal communication only occurred when the internal party of the royal family initiated the conversation. Abdi dalem was reluctant to initiate any conversation related to the problem of the royal family. As Abdi dalem whose duty is to serve the Royal

Palace of Surakarta, they felt they should not intervene since it might worsen the crisis.

This study also found the commitment of Abdi dalem to serve the palace, which is interesting. They stated that they would rather serve the palace than the king in personal sense. Therefore, they claimed that whoever the king is, it will not affect their loyalty to the palace.

> *".. I intend to serve only the palace instead of the king or the king's sons. So, I am not involved in the conflict of the king's sons"*
>
> (Abdi dalem)

Communication with external stakeholder

In contrary to communication among the internal disputing parties, there was communication with mass media as a stakeholder of the Royal Palace of Surakarta. The disputing parties were responsive to mass media, either in a formal way through a press conference or through personal interviews.

The journalists indicated their relationship with the family of the Royal Palace of Surakarta was good, which was beneficial for all parties. However, some media were inclined to support only one of the parties. They perceived the publication of the news as often unparalleled with the information that they gave.

The Royal Palace of Surakarta did not provide official information and statements in newsletter, magazine, or social media. Consequently, the public did not obtain comprehensive information about the Royal Palace of Surakarta except from the mass media or informal reports. As a matter of fact, the reliance of the Royal Palace of Surakarta on the mass media to convey information to the public was risky mainly because they had their own perspective in framing the issue, which may be opposed to those of the organisation.

Another consequence of the use of one-way communication of media was the lack of communication. This led to an internalisation of information that was constructed by the stakeholders and public (Heide & Simonsson, 2014). Through crisis communication, the messages constructed by the organisation have a capacity to contribute to building positive responses of the public through communication channels (Seeger et al., 2005).

In fact, the media has a major influence on the formation of public opinion, particularly when it only presents one view instead of being neutral. In unbalanced reports, facts are irrelevant (White, 2009). The information obtained from media will affect the beliefs and perception toward the capacity of an organisation (Le Roux & Roux, 2013).

Social Construction of Crisis Communication

Public has different perceptions about the crisis, especially in assessing the level of the impact or the intensification of the crisis. The relationship that has been established by the organisation should be able to influence the public perception towards it

and its image (Park & Reber, 2011). The Royal Palace of Surakarta had a negative image since the public perceived that it was responsible for the crisis. Although it was supported by the media, the support was merely on a surface level. In addition, the message also tended to protect the interests of each party. The disputing parties felt that the easiest way to approach the public was to establish a relationship with the media.

This study also found out that one of important factors in the construction of meaning in the crisis was culture. In communication process, it was often forgotten that the indigenous culture of the Royal Palace of Surakarta is different from the social culture in general. Meanwhile, the construction of meaning should be done in accordance with its respective culture. Differences in cultural customs and culture were not easily understood by stakeholder outside the Royal family that led to various perceptions. Parties outside the Royal Palace did not understand the organisational culture of the Royal Palace of Surakarta and the internal family also felt that the outsiders did not understand them.

Although both disputing parties had motivation to minimise the crisis, their efforts did not produce any significant changes. Meanwhile from the interviews, it can be concluded that the disputing parties did not implement a strategy to acknowledge responsibility for the crisis and claimed that they would undertake strategic steps to resolve the crisis.

Organisation goes through transformation, evolution, and change corresponding with the changes in the era. Social structures of the organisation are produced and reproduced by its members through communication. In this context, language becomes a vehicle to produce and reproduce social reality in understanding the world. Organisation as a social construction is a basis for communication among members of the organisation, which is the essence of production and reproduction of social structure (Falkheimer & Heide, 2006).

Social construction theory may explain why for example, family members of the Royal Palace of Surakarta who have distinctive values are better understood by their relatives but not by people outside the Royal Palace.

Furthermore, it could explain why the Royal Palace of Surakarta has survived all this while time and devotion to the king remains important. Furthermore, the social construction approach could explicate the role of culture in constructing the meaning, belief, and action. Basically, the selection and interpretation of the risk and risk messages are affected by the distinctive culture of particular society (Aldoory, 2009).

Societies have different perceptions of crisis, particularly regarding how serious or how often the crisis occurs. The intertwined relationship between organisation and public should influence public perception of the organisation and its image (Park & Reber, 2011).The Royal Palace of Surakarta as the organisation which received a negative image for being responsible for the crisis was still supported by the society, especially

those who believe in the culture and myth of revelation.

Crisis Communication Model

Based on the above explanation, the model below describes crisis communication in the Royal Palace of Surakarta.
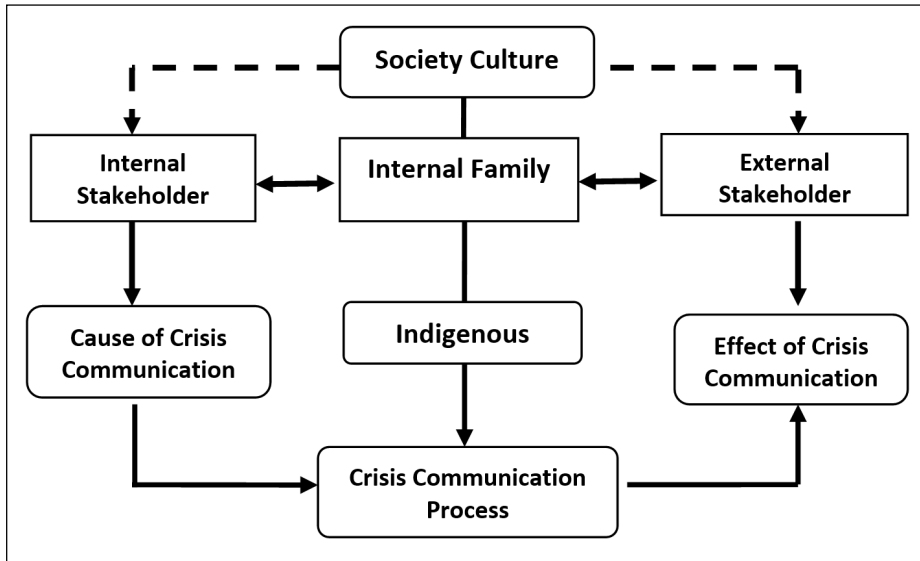

Figure 1. Crisis communication model in the Royal Palace of Surakarta (Purworini, 2016)

Figure 1 is the flowchart of the crisis communication process. The ongoing process is continuous rather than linear. Some elements involving the process are summarised in this model. This study was focused mainly on crisis communication process which described how communication was conducted by and among royal family members and stakeholders of the Royal Palace of Surakarta. Some elements could not be ignored in analysing the ongoing crisis communication considering since communication and organisational life are inseparable.

A crisis does not occur naturally, instead it is related to the social, economic and political conditions. Therefore, it is necessary to consider contextual factors when discussing a crisis resolution. Crisis communication in practice is embedded within the contextual factors where the communication occurs (Hart, 1993; Sellnow & Seeger, 2013).

As shown in Figure 1, contextual factors are necessary in crisis communication. Since the organisation is a part of society, the Royal Palace of Surakarta and the internal parties are linked to it in the context of the profession, education, and social link.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The study showed that communication in the Royal Palace of Surakarta occurred in one direction. The internal family of the Royal Palace of Surakarta did not utilise a variety of media to facilitate two-way communication that required feedback. Consequently, when a crisis occurred, the communication process could not be done appropriately.

A crisis that creates a high degree of uncertainty obliged the main stakeholders to have direct communication regarding the crisis. Therefore, it can be observed in a case of communication study that a crisis always involves stakeholders. It makes sense since in crisis situations, communication channels are often stagnant when in fact communication is urgently required (Seeger & Padgett, 2010).

The crisis communication, in this case, does not naturally exist. It is a process created by individuals of the disputing parties and stakeholders. Communication taking place in a private organisation often does not have a significant role in solving the crisis. In fact, the feeling of reluctant and brotherhood bounded the negotiation. In this family conflict, there are various types of internal communication depending on the parties involved. In a crisis, there are various types of internal communication depending on the parties involved. Internal stakeholders, particularly, can support the organization's position in the society.

The process of communication with the model of public information is carried out in one direction and there is no opportunity for further discussion and feedback. The Royal Palace of Surakarta needs to communicate effectively in giving responses to the society. Hopefully, this openness can result in support from the community. The existence of The Royal Palace of Surakarta Hadiningrat as a valuable cultural heritage must be the main goal of conflict resolution. Therefore, the Royal Palace of Surakarta was not able to optimise the existing relationships to establish an effective crisis communication process. This type of organisation tends to make others follow what is claimed by the organisation (Fearn-banks, 2011; Lee, 2009).

One of the limitations of this study was it employed only one major case as a unit of analysis rather than examining various cases that emerged. Although in-depth interviews were conducted with the disputing parties, it should involve other parties as well. Therefore, information from both parties will provide a full picture of the prevailing crisis communication.

Although this study has weaknesses in terms of having limited samples, it has described well the communication process of the stakeholders involved in the crisis situation. It was not easy to obtain data from informants considering the fact this study focused on a sensitive issue. This study thus has contributed to describing crisis communication process in an Indonesian context.

Future research should study crisis communication in public organisations by focusing on indigenous culture Research could also look at the diversity of crisis communication across Asia.

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