



UNIVERSITY OF GOTHENBURG

“You need to trust your guts”

A study about internal crisis communication strategies of the municipally owned companies in Gothenburg

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ABSTRACT

Crisis communication is a well-covered research area focusing on how organization should, or should have communicated in crisis situations. Most of the research relates to the external dimension of communication and in contrary; this study aims to contribute in an internal communicative perspective of crisis communication research. The study is a descriptive case study of the city of Gothenburg and interviews with Communication Managers of the municipally owned companies have been conducted. The focus lies on which communication strategies the companies use for internal communication in crisis management.

Using the research question of: “*What are the implications of internal crisis communication?*” and an inductive approach, the interviews have been analyzed with a grounded theory technique and further compared with existing crisis communication and public relation theory, in order to identify and discuss what internal crisis communication implies practically and theoretically. The findings indicate that internal crisis communication to some extent can be seen as a variation of external crisis communication, but also includes a problematic balance concerning to support and accommodate the employees, which is not identified in external crisis communication. Theoretically, the result indicates internal crisis communication to imply a different, less strategic form of crisis communication.

Key words: *Internal Crisis Communication, Crisis Communication, Internal Communication, Crisis strategy, Employee communication.*

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Internal Crisis Communication - an undiscovered area

Crises are all around us and happen all the time. We all see and hear about them on the news, share them and sometimes we can even be in the center of them. Things no one could have predicted occur and affect us negatively, and for organizations it is not a question of if a crisis will occur but rather when. Crisis communication is defined as “the dialogue between the organization and its publics prior to, during, and after the negative occurrences”¹, and part of effective crisis management, which could not only eliminate or minimize the damage of a crisis but also sometimes bring the company an even better reputation, if handled well.²

Professor Katherine Fearn-Banks argues that the public that organizations in crisis situations are communicating to, often are seen as only one general public. She means that it is possible and also better to see this public as different specific public groups and uses four categories for this division; the *enabling public*, the *functional public*, the *normative public* and *diffuse publics*. The *enabling public* includes the people of power and authority in crisis, like for example managers, the CEO etc., whereas the *functional public* is the people who actually make the organization work, like for example employees, unions, volunteers, suppliers, vendors and customers. The *normative public* is people who share values with the organization in crisis like professional organization and competitors; and other *diffused publics* are only indirectly linked to the company, like for example media, community groups etc.³ Crisis communication literature have mainly focused on this last category of public, explaining and evaluating how organizations in crisis situations have chosen or should have chosen to communicate with external publics, particularly the media. This study will take another approach, focusing on Fearn-Banks second public category the *functional public*, and more specifically on how and what organizations are communicating to the employees in crisis situations.

Since most academic crisis communication literature focus on the external aspect of crisis communication, several researchers have expressed a lack of academic research on the internal dimension of crisis communication.⁴ It is this gap in academic literature that this study aims to contribute in fulfilling.

¹ Fearn-Banks, K. 2002:2

² Ibid

³ Fearn-Banks, K. 2002:3

⁴ Taylor, M. 2010:703 & Frandsen, F. & Johansen W. 2011:348

1.2 Why is the internal dimension of Crisis Communication necessary to study?

Fearn-Banks is one of very few crisis communication authors, who express the need for companies to not only focus on the external stakeholders and the communication to these in managing a crisis, but also to communicate with the internal stakeholders of the functional public, i.e. the employees. According to her; “internal publics are crucial in a crisis because they are the most believable spokespersons⁵” and they are often hunt up by media for comments, simply because they almost never are hired or paid to speak for the company. As well, she argues that employees can be seen as the link between a company and the customers/clients, and has the power to influence whether a customer/client stays with the company in a crisis or abandons it⁶.

Fearn-Bank’s argument can be related to the field of internal communication (not in crisis situations), which is a quiet new discipline in academic research⁷. Researchers have argued that internal communication is important for organizations and starting to become prioritized on the agenda, as it can create a collaborative and energized work force that is willing to give their very best for the organization. And after all, it is the people who work for the organization that deliver the business goals.⁸ As well good internal communication is also considered to increase the employees’ identification with and loyalty towards the company⁹. An internal communication strategy could therefore be seen as necessary and important to have as part of crisis management, as it is in tough times an organizations are in need of hard working, loyal employees who are easy to collaborate with.

1.3 Gothenburg - the case of a crisis ridden municipally

In April of 2010, one of Sweden’s TV programs of investigative journalism, broadcasted a program revealing information that several officials and administrators of municipally owned companies in Gothenburg were suspected of doing privat businesses with procured companies¹⁰. The scandal was very well covered in the media after the program, and also resulted in

⁵ Fearn-Banks, K. 2002:77

⁶ Ibid

⁷ Smith, L. 2008:14

⁸ Smith, L. 2008:6

⁹ Quirke B. 2008:67

¹⁰ Sponberg, U. 2011

discussions about both the extent of corruption in Sweden and whether the corruption legislation should become stricter¹¹. This tv-program was the trigger factor of what now is known as the “Bribery Scandal” (own translation), which includes several more bribery scandals and accounting frauds among officials and administrators than the ones mentioned above. Employees and managers from several other municipally owned companies were involved in other accounting frauds, bribery scandals and similar crimes¹² and the “Bribery Scandal” resulted in approximately forty lawsuits (some still under investigation two years later) and several layoffs of both officials and managers within the municipally¹³.

The “Bribery Scandal” of Gothenburg could be described as unique of its kind as no other Swedish municipally ever have faced a scandal of this proportion. It is also a scandal including several crisis and where several municipally owned companies were exposed and negatively portrayed in the media. The crises are considered to have damaged the reputation and brand of both the city and also the companies concerned.¹⁴ Thereby, crisis communication strategies are most certainly an up to date topic in the city of Gothenburg and among the municipally owned companies, which is the reason for using the city of Gothenburg with its municipally owned companies is the case in this study.

1.4 Purpose & Research Question

This study aims to increase the knowledge of a so far, quite unexplored area of crisis communication, i.e. internal crisis communication. The study has a descriptive purpose, to identify and discuss which strategies for internal communication the municipally owned companies in Gothenburg use in crisis management and thereby answer the following research question: *What are the implications of internal crisis communication?* With this research question I wish to describe what internal crisis communication imply in terms of fields of application, how it is used and communication wise between the managers and the public. Also, comparisons with existing crisis communication theories focusing on external communication will be made in order to give implications of what internal crisis communication theoretically imply.

¹¹ Dagens Nyheter 2010

¹² Sponberg, U. 2011

¹³ Hernadi, Al 2011

¹⁴ Pavlica, A. 2012

1.5 Defining Internal Communication & Communication Strategy

Although internal communication is a quite new academic field, several definitions of the concept exist. Some researchers like for example Eileen Scholes has a stakeholder perspective, describing internal communication as “the professional management of interactions between all those with interest or ‘a stake’ in a particular organization,”¹⁵ whereas others such as Joseph Cornelissen is focusing on the methods and communication channels used by a company to communicate with its employees¹⁶. A third approach, which is a very well studied area, is that internal communication is synonymous with employee communication or peer communication, describing the two-way communication between colleagues regarding for example working task or project issues¹⁷. For this study, Mary Welch and Paul Jackson’s description of internal communication as internal corporate communication is used, defined as; “communication between an organization’s strategic managers and its internal stakeholders, designated to promote commitment to the organization, a sense of belonging to it, awareness of its changing environment and understanding of its evolving aims.”¹⁸ The internal stakeholders are in this study all the employees, regardless of hierarchic level or work responsibilities, and the communication includes both the management of the interactions, the context of the information shared and the channels used to communicate it.

For the concept of communication strategy, Joseph Cornelissen’s definition is used in this study. He describes it to be “the general set of communication objectives and related communication programs or tactics chosen by an organization in order to support the corporate strategy in the organization.”¹⁹ This means that a communication strategy in this study does not necessary need to be a policy document, but includes both actions and tactics. A wide definition of this kind is used in this study because of its inductive character and that no, out of previous research, imaginable results of this study can be predicted beforehand.

1.6 Delimitations

The study is a case study of the municipally owned companies in Gothenburg and limited only to these analytical units and the present period of time. No specific crisis is evaluated and no

¹⁵ Scholes, E. 1997:XVIII

¹⁶ Cornelissen, J. 2011:258

¹⁷ Grunig, J. 1992:540

¹⁸ Welch, M. Jackson, P. 2007:186

¹⁹ Cornelissen, J. 2011:254

generalizations are supposed to be done through this study, but instead the focus lies on identifying how the companies wish to communicate with the employees in a crisis situation, and what information is relevant for such communication.

1.7 Disposition

The study is divided into five different sections. In the introducing part, the starting point of this study is described and followed by the thesis purpose and research question. In the second section, crisis communication and public relation theory is described, as the two research areas that internal crisis communication strategies and this thesis are connected to. It is followed by a chapter where the research design and the procedure of collecting the empirical data are described. The fourth chapter described the technique and procedure of analysis and in Results & Discussion, the results from the empirical data are described, discussed and also compared to the crisis communication and public relation theory of the theoretical framework. The final part of this thesis includes the concluding remarks of this study and some recommendations for future research are made.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In this chapter, the theoretical framework used for this thesis is described. The theories should not be tested against the empirical material, but rather compared with the findings of the study, in order to describe the implications of internal crisis communication.

2.1 Background

Crisis Communication has in recent years become more of an independent academic discipline in communication research²⁰ and today a simple Google Scholar search gives over 1.8 millions of hits on the subject. The research area was developed from the classical theory of public relation, the *Excellence Theory* of 1985, which will be further described in this chapter, and started as a critique against Grunig and Grunig's normative description of how organizations should best practice public relation. Instead of speculating around how an organization could be most effective and ethical in organizing their public relation, several researchers started to look at and describe how public relations actually had been practiced in different situations.²¹ This resulted in an era where numerous best practice and case-studies books in the crisis research area were published, focusing on the external dimension of crisis communication, i.e. how companies in crisis situations had communicated with their external stakeholders, – i.e. media, customers/clients, business partners etc. having a tactical, reactive and event-oriented viewpoint on crisis communication. However, since the 2000s, the discipline has evolved more towards a more strategic, proactive and process-oriented perspective. Crisis communication research today focus on the strategic management of crisis, the strategic preparedness of crisis and how to minimize the damage of a crisis before it escalates, when it escalates and after the escalation.²²

Previous studies on crisis communication have mainly focused on the external communication of crisis management, and several researchers have expressed a lack of academic research on the internal dimension of crisis communication, i.e. how to communicate with the employees as part of crisis management.²³ But a few examples of a more internal approach do exist, mainly concentrating on sense making among employees and other psychological aspects of crisis management²⁴. One recently conducted study by Winni Johansen, Helle Aggerholm and Finn

²⁰ Frandsen, F. & Johansen, W. 2011:347

²¹ Pang, A., Yin, J., Cameron, G. 2010:528-529

²² Pang, A., Yin, J., Cameron, G. 2010:528-529

²³ Taylor, M. 2010:703, Frandsen, F. & Johansen W. 2011:348

²⁴ Johansen, W., Aggerholm, H., Frandsen F. 2011:2, Frandsen, F. & Johansen, W. 2011:351

Frandsen from Aarhus University in Denmark, do though cover a more communicative aspect since they quantitatively describe how middle managers in public and private Danish companies perceive internal crisis communication and their companies' formal crisis preparedness²⁵.

Johansen, Aggerholm and Frandsen results show that 77 percent of the studied public Danish companies and 88 percent of the private companies, did have crisis plans including an internal dimension of crisis management. They also argue that public companies appear to have less focus on internal crisis communication than private organizations.²⁶

2.2 Defining crisis

Although crisis communication is considered to be a quite new research area, a number of definitions of crisis exist. These can be divided into two main approaches: the organization-centered approach and the stakeholder approach.²⁷

2.2.1 The organization-centered approach

Charles F. Herman is often seen as the originator of the organization-centered approach, arguing that "an organizational crisis (1) threatens high-priority values of the organization, (2) presents a restricted amount of time in which a response can be made, and (3) is unexpected or unanticipated by the organization."²⁸ Several crisis communication researchers such as Fearn-Banks, but also Steven Fink and Ian Mitroff, whose crisis theories are further described later in this chapter, support this definition but with an specification on one or several of Herman's points. Fearn-Banks is focused on Herman's first descriptive point; the effects and threats of a crisis, saying that "a crisis is a major occurrence with a potentially negative outcome affecting an organization, company, industry, as well as its publics, products, services, or good name."²⁹ Fink and Mitroff on the other hand are more focused on the fact that it is a surprising event.³⁰ Fink notes, "a crisis is an unstable time or state of affairs in which a decisive change is impending."³¹ However, Fink also argues that crisis does not necessary have to be bad but can in fact make the

²⁵ Johansen, W., Aggerholm, H., Frandsen F. 2011:2

²⁶ Johansen, W., Aggerholm, H., Frandsen F. 2011:8

²⁷ Jacobsson, J., Simonsson, D. 2011:2-8

²⁸ Herman, C. 1963:64

²⁹ Fearn-Banks, K. 2002:2

³⁰ Jacobsson, J., Simonsson, D. 2011:3

³¹ Fink, S. 1986:15

organization both better and stronger.³² This positive perspective of crisis is also something Fearn-Banks mentions in her work.³³

2.2.2 The stakeholder approach

The stakeholder approach of crisis should not be seen as a contrary to the organization-center approach of crisis, but rather as a development of it³⁴. Crisis expert Timothy Coombs is seen as the central researcher in this approach arguing that “a crisis is the perception of an unpredictable event that threatens important expectancies of stakeholders and can seriously impact an organization’s performance and generate negative outcomes.³⁵” Coombs has an “outside-in approach,”³⁶ seeing crisis from a stakeholder perspective, and arguing that a crisis only exist if the stakeholders perceive it as a crisis. His perspective is also more focused on how the crisis starts, who starts it and how it is possible to respond to it, whereas the organization-centered approach focus on how the organization can handle the crisis³⁷.

2.3 Crisis as a process

2.3.1 The three-staged approach

Bill Richardsson was the first writer to give a detailed description of crisis as a three-staged process, an approach that has become very popular when describing crisis. Richardsson explains the components to be; the pre-crisis or pre-disaster phase, crisis impact or rescue phase and recovery or demise phase³⁸. Out of this theory, Timothy Coombs divided the crisis management process into the pre-crisis stage, the crisis stage and the post-crisis stage, arguing that the two most influential crisis theorists; Steven Fink and Ian Mitroff’s models (further described in the next section) fit naturally within this three-stage approach (see table 2.1 on page 13).

³² Fink, S. 1986:15

³³ Fearn-Banks, K. 2002:2

³⁴ Jacobsson, J., Simonsson, D. 2011:4

³⁵ Coombs, T. 2012:2

³⁶ Jacobsson, J., Simonsson, D. 2011:4

³⁷ Ibid

³⁸ Richardsson, B. 1994:46-47

Tabel 2.3.1 Comparison of Staged Approached of Crisis

<i>Fink</i>	<i>Mitroff</i>	<i>Three-Stage</i>
Prodromal	Signal Detection	Pre-crisis
	Probing and Prevention	
Crisis Breakout	Damage Containment	Crisis
Chronic	Recovery	
Resolution	Learning	Post-crisis

Source: Coombs 2012:10

Comment: The table illustrates the similarities between Coomb's three-staged approach of crisis, using a division between the Pre-crisis, Crisis and Post-crisis stage, and Fink's four-staged perspective as well as Mitroff's five-staged model.

2.3.2 Fink's four-staged model

Before Fink's publication of *Crisis Management – Planning for the Inevitable* in 1985 crisis were generally seen as only an event that was not possible to detect in advance or handle before the breakout. But his four-staged model was the beginning of seeing crisis as a process, where crisis can be both identified before the actual event as well as managed in a proactive way.³⁹ Fink equates crises with diseases, and says that the duration and intensity of the symptoms is dependent on variables such as “the strain of the virus, the age and condition of the patient and the potency of the medication and the skill of the physician.”⁴⁰ He sees crisis as fluid, dynamic and unstable processes that do not necessary have to be bad, but always included some kind of risk and uncertainty.

According to Fink, there are four different stages of crises; the prodromal crisis stage, the acute crisis stage, the cronic crisis stage and the crisis resolution stage; but not all crises have them all. The prodromal crisis stage is the warning stage, where it is possible to identify prodromes of the crisis to come. Fink means that prodroms can be obvious or almost impossible to recognize, and stresses that identifying the warning signals in this stage is important because it helps the organization to manage the crisis to come. And even though organizations cannot always do anything particular to prevent a crisis, after the prodroms have been identifying, Fink argues that just knowing the existents of the problem and its potential development, makes the organization more prepared for the following possible crisis stages. The crisis breakout stage is when the crisis

³⁹ Coombs, T. 2012:7

⁴⁰ Fink, S. 1986:20

has erupted and some damage has been made. Fink argues this stage to often be the shortest of a crisis, but feels like the longest because of its intensity. The followed stage called the chronic crisis stage is later on defined as the clean-up stage where the organization has time to recover from the crisis and analyze what they did well or wrong in crisis management. The fourth and final stage, named the crisis resolution stage, is simply “when the patient is well and whole again”.

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2.3.3 Mitroff's five phases of a crisis

Another influential approach of describing crisis in staged models came from Ian Mitroff in 1994, as he developed a crisis into five phases; (1) signal detection, where the focus should be to identify warning signals and handle them to prevent the crisis; (2) probing and prevention, where the organization are looking for risk factors and trying to minimize the probability for them to harm, (3) damage containment, when the crisis hits the organization, (4) recovery, when the organizational members work to return to ordinary work routines and (5) learning, when the crisis is reviewed and the management of it criticized, in order to do better next time.⁴²

Mitroff's model is very similar with Fink's 4-stage approach, and all of the phases can be equated with a stage. The signal detection and probing and prevention can be equated with the prodromal phase, Mitroff's damage containment stage corresponds Fink's crisis breakout stage, the recovery and chronic phases are similar, and both the learning phase and resolution stage signals the end of the crisis. But the difference between the two writers lie in the emphasis of detection, limiting the effects of a crisis, the focus on crisis management and their view of how a crisis ends. While Fink only says crisis can be prevented by looking for signals, Mitroff means that crisis risks always are present, and that these continuously and actively needs to be identified in order to prevent them. Mitroff also put more emphasis on limiting the effects of the crisis than as well as describing how management team can work in each phase to minimize the damage, whereas Fink's model only document that organizations can recover quickly or slowly. In a similar way, Fink describes the resolution stage to be when the crisis is over, while Mitroff focus on the management to learn from their actions and used to improve the team for the next crisis. For Mitroff, the end of a crisis is seen as the beginning of a new crisis process.⁴³ To summarize, Fink's model is more descriptive, describing the characteristic of each stage of a crisis, whereas Mitroff's focusing on managing the crisis.

⁴¹ Fink, S. 1986:25

⁴² Mitroff, I. 1994:101-113

⁴³ Coombs, T. 2012:8-9

2.4 Different Types of Crisis and Crisis Strategies

Several researchers argue that there is not only one nature of crisis, but that crises can come in various forms. Fearn-Banks tries to map the most common by listing 43 different types of crisis, including situations like tax problems, earthquakes and suicide⁴⁴, where as other authors, such as Ibrahim Shaluf, Fakharu'l-razi Ahmadun and Aini Mat Said have summarized classical crisis authors like Laurence Barton and Ian Mitroffs' work,⁴⁵ categorizing crises into community crisis and non-community crisis. According to them community crisis includes conflict situations, such as internal conflicts like strikes or internal ethic conflicts, and non-conflict situations like economic and financial crisis. The non-community crisis category includes accidents of any kind.⁴⁶

Crisis expert Timothy Coombs defines different types of crises based on two dimensions; the intentional-unintentional dimension, which refers to if the event was done deliberately or not, and the internal-external dimension, which is based on if the crisis was a result from something within or outside the organization.⁴⁷ The result is a matrix of four crisis types: *Faux-pas* (external and unintentional crisis), *Accidents* (internal and unintentional crisis), *Terrorism* (external and intentional crisis) and *Transgressions* (internal and intentional),⁴⁸ see Figure 2.3 below. According to Coombs, *faux pas* is the kind of crises when a company believes to do what is appropriate, but another external actor sees the action as inappropriate⁴⁹. Social responsibility is within this category in focus.⁵⁰ *Accidents* are described to be uncontrollable events that happen during normal organization circumstances, and examples are product defects and employee injuries⁵¹. *Terrorism* is intentional action taken by an external actor, made to hurt the company directly or indirectly. According to Coombs this kind of crisis is uncontrollable and sabotage, hostage taking or workplace violence is used as examples. The fourth and final category *Transgression* is described to be intentional actions, consciously taken by an organization itself. This could for example be to sell defective or dangerous products, violating laws or withholding inappropriate information.⁵²

⁴⁴ Fearn-Banks, K. 2002:23

⁴⁵ Shaluf, I. Ahmadun, F., Mat Sad, A., 2003:24-32

⁴⁶ Ibid

⁴⁷ Coombs, T. 1995:454-455

⁴⁸ Cornelissen, J. 2008:225

⁴⁹ Coombs, T. 1995:455

⁵⁰ Cornelissen, J. 2008:225

⁵¹ Coombs, T. 1995:456

⁵² Coombs, T. 1995:457

Table 2.4.1 Crisis type matrix

	Unintentional	Intentional
External	<i>Faux pas</i>	<i>Terrorism</i>
Internal	<i>Accidents</i>	<i>Transgressions</i>

Source: Coombs, T. 1995:457

Comment: The table illustrates Timothy Coomb's matrix of different crisis types, using two dimensions: if it was unintentional or intentional and if it arrived from external factors or internal factors.

Cornelissen argues that defining crises are necessary in crisis management because it “provides a basis for identifying the most appropriate communication strategy”⁵³, and this is something Coomb also mentions⁵⁴. However, Coomb also argues that factors like the truthfulness of evidence in a crisis and the damage it cost the company, also affects which crisis response strategy to choose, whereas Cornelissen are more focused on if the public's perception of the crisis is that the company is responsible or not. A company perceived to have low responsibility in the crisis should on his account choose to distance itself from or even deny the existence of the crisis, whereas the company perceived to be responsible in a crisis situation should apologize for the situation or take on strong corrective actions in order to prevent a similar crisis for the future.⁵⁵ For a more detailed view of the different strategies to choose from dependent on the level of responsibility, see table 2.3.2 below.

⁵³ Cornelissen, J. 2008:225

⁵⁴ Coombs, T. 1995:454

⁵⁵ Cornelissen, J. 2008:225-227

Table 2.4.2 – Crisis Communication Strategies

Perception of low level of responsibility		Perception of high level of responsibility	
Nonexistence strategies		Acceptance strategy	
1. Denial	<i>Denying that the crisis exist</i>	1. Full apology	<i>Apologizing for the crisis and accepting the blame</i>
2. Clarification	<i>Explaining why there is no crisis</i>	2. Remediation	<i>Announcing some form of compensation or help the victims</i>
3. Attack	<i>Confronting the group or person who claims there is a crisis</i>	3. Repentance	<i>A tactic of asking of forgiveness</i>
Distance strategies		Accommodative strategy	
1. Excuse	<i>Denying the intention of the crisis</i>	1. Rectification	<i>Taking corrective action to prevent a recurrence of the crisis in the future</i>
2. Downplay	<i>Convincing the public that the situation is not that bad in itself or compared to other crises</i>		
Association strategies			
1. Bolstering	<i>Reminding the public of existing positive aspects of the organization</i>		
2. Transcendence	<i>Associating the crisis with a desirable, higher order goal</i>		
Suffering strategy			
1. Victimization	<i>A tactic of portraying the organization as the victim</i>		

Source: Cornelissen 2008: 226

Comment: The table illustrates which different crisis response strategies organizations can use, dependent on if the organization is perceived to have low or high responsibility of the situation. The different strategies are divided into one left and one right column of perceived low respectively high responsibility and the strategies to use are subheadings to the bolded strategies. A short description follows the different strategies in italics.

2.5 The four models of Public Relations – applied to an internal public

The purpose of Public Relations is to build a relationship between an organization and its publics. This means that it is part of communication management, and used for the relationship with both external and internal publics.⁵⁶ As part of the Excellence Theory, James and Larissa Grunig established four models of public relations in 1984, described as the *press agency* model,

⁵⁶ Grunig, L., Grunig J. E., Dozier, D. M. 2002:2

the *public information* model, the *two-way symmetrical* and the *two-way asymmetrical* model. The establishment was, according to the authors made in order to explain the wide variety of how organizations practiced public relations⁵⁷. Grunigs' contribution to public relation theory is according to the authors themselves a development of Eric Goldmans division of public relations, in combination of the distinction between both Leo Thayer's synchronic and diachronic communication as well as one-way and two-way communication⁵⁸. Goldman made a difference between "the public be fooled" and "the public be informed" in explaining how public relation had developed historically, and Grunigs' used this as inspiration for one underlying variable of the models, i.e. the purpose. For the same variable they also used Thayers's concept of synchronic and diachronic communication, i.e. the difference in trying to "synchronize" or affect the publics' behaviors in the best way for the organization, or to negotiate a state of affairs that is favorable for both the organization and its public by using diachronic communication. J. Grunig and L. Grunig did not use the term synchronic or diachronic communication, but instead symmetrical and asymmetrical communication to describe if an organization's purpose was striving for balanced or unbalanced communication. Grunigs' second underlying variable of the four models is direction and for this variable, the distinction between one-way and two-way communication, originally described by Scott Cutlip and in 1952.⁵⁹

2.5.1 Model 1: press agency

In the *press agency* model public relation is to get publicity for the organization and the focus is mainly to seek attention for the company. The expression "all PR is good PR" fits well into this model, which includes pure one-way and asymmetrical communication. This means that the organization practicing this PR model carries out a monologue with its public, and tries to change the public into thinking and behaving in the way the organization wants them to.⁶⁰

2.5.2 Model 2: public information

In the *public information* model messages are rather sent with accurate information than unfavorable information. Public relation is here used as a disseminator of information, and trust and reliance is based on spreading information. It is a one-way communication model, which means the organization practicing public relation of this kind is having a monologue with its public. Similarly with the press agency model it is also an asymmetrical model.⁶¹

⁵⁷ Grunig, J., E., 1992:286

⁵⁸ Grunig, J., E., 1992:286-290

⁵⁹ Grunig, J., E., 1992:286

⁶⁰ Grunig, L., Grunig J. E., Dozier, D. M. 2002:306-310, Grunig, J., Grunig, L., 2006:10-11

⁶¹ Ibid

2.5.3 Model 3: two-way asymmetrical

As mentioned in the name of it, two-way communication is practiced in the *two-way asymmetrical* model. This means that the organization is using dialogue instead of monologue while communicating to the public. The goal in this model is however to persuade the public into behaving as the organization wants them to behave, and it is simply because of this goal that two-way communication occur. In other words, organizations practicing public relation through this model use the dialogue for research to use in order to determine how to persuade publics to make them believe what the organization wants.⁶²

2.5.4 Model 4: two-way symmetrical

In the *two-way symmetrical* model, understanding is the main objective of public relations, rather than persuasion. A dialogue is here used between the organization and the public in order to change and create ideas, attitudes and behaviors for both the organization and its public. In this model there should not be any conflict between the organization's management and the public, but public relations should be used to provide meditation and negotiate potential conflicts.⁶³

2.6 Summary & Application of Theoretical Framework

Crises are neither unambiguous per definition nor as a phenomenon, as several definitions and viewpoints of the process exist. A crisis can be seen from an “inside-out” approach and focus on how it affects the organization, or an “outside-in” approach where what stakeholders perceive as a crisis is crucial. Back in the days, crises were often seen as a happening whereas the literature today expresses it to be a process that includes three stages: the pre-crisis stage, crisis stage and post-crisis stage. Richardsson explains this three-staged approach to include the work of two of the most influential crisis theorists; Mitroff and Fink. Mitroff's and Fink's theories are similar in several ways but different when it comes to the number of different stages of the process and the mindset of how crises evolves, where Mitroff focus on crisis management and actions made to limit the crisis effects and Fink is more restrictive in his theory. This part of the theoretical framework is later in this thesis compared with the empirical data, in order to discuss in which situations crisis communication strategies are used in the companies concerned, and thereby

⁶² Grunig, L., Grunig J. E., Dozier, D. M. 2002:306-310, Grunig, J., Grunig, L., 2006:10-11

⁶³ Ibid

describe what internal crisis communication as a concept, would imply in terms of field of application.

How a crisis should be handled is described to be different in different situations and dependent on the type of crisis, according to Coombs and Cornelissen. Dependent on how the crisis started, if it is within the organization and/or the degree of responsibility of it, different ways and strategies against or towards the crisis should be used. This part of the theoretical framework is in the Result and Discussion section compared with the empirical data in order to describe if internal crisis communication implies the same variation of strategies as being described in existing crisis communication theories which focus on a more external aspect.

Grunig's and Grunig's Excellence Theory describe different models of how organizations practice public relations and the reason for the relation. The main dimensions used in this theory to create and differentiate four types of models from one another are; the purpose that vary between persuasion and understanding, and the balance in the communication, if a monologue or dialogue is used. This part of the theoretical framework is later in this thesis used in comparison with the empirical data in order to describe what kind of public relation between management and employees, internal crisis communication imply.

3. RESEARCH DESIGN, METHODOLOGY & MATERIAL

In this section, the research design, methodology and material used for this study is described. As well, a discussion about the trustworthiness and authenticity of the study, in terms of validity and reliability, is found in the end of the chapter.

3.1 Research Design

This study is conducted with a qualitative research approach, as a reason for the purpose and research questions of the study. Qualitative research strategies are often used when one is emphasizing “words rather than quantification⁶⁴” and as the purpose of the study is to identify and discuss the internal crisis communication strategies of the municipally owned companies in Gothenburg, and not how common a certain internal crisis communication strategy is, a qualitative research approach was chosen.

The concepts of “induction” and “deduction” are often used in research, where the former includes a mindset where the empirics in a study is superior the theory in order to bring new knowledge, and the latter conversely.⁶⁵ Since few studies have been conducted in internal crisis communication, and this study aims to contribute in fulfilling this gap in academic literature, an inductive approach was chosen and the empirical material constitute the main foundation of the results in the study. However, like most inductively formed research also includes a certain degree of deduction⁶⁶, this study also includes some deductive features, as crisis communication and public relation theory were used in comparison with the results from the empirical material.

3.1.1 Case study design

Case study methods are often used in Social Science research in order to contribute to knowledge about individuals, groups and organizations. This is because it allows for examinations when meaningful characteristics of real-life situations are retained, such as for organizational situations and processes.⁶⁷ Treadwell argues that the case studies are conducted in order to “help readers’ understanding or to provide them with theoretical insights,”⁶⁸ which goes in hand with the descriptive purpose of this study. The advantage of case study method is that it gives the

⁶⁴ Bryman, A. 2008:22

⁶⁵ Esaïasson, P., Gilljam, M., Oscarsson, H. Wångerud, L. 2012:223,276

⁶⁶ Bryman, A. 2008:11

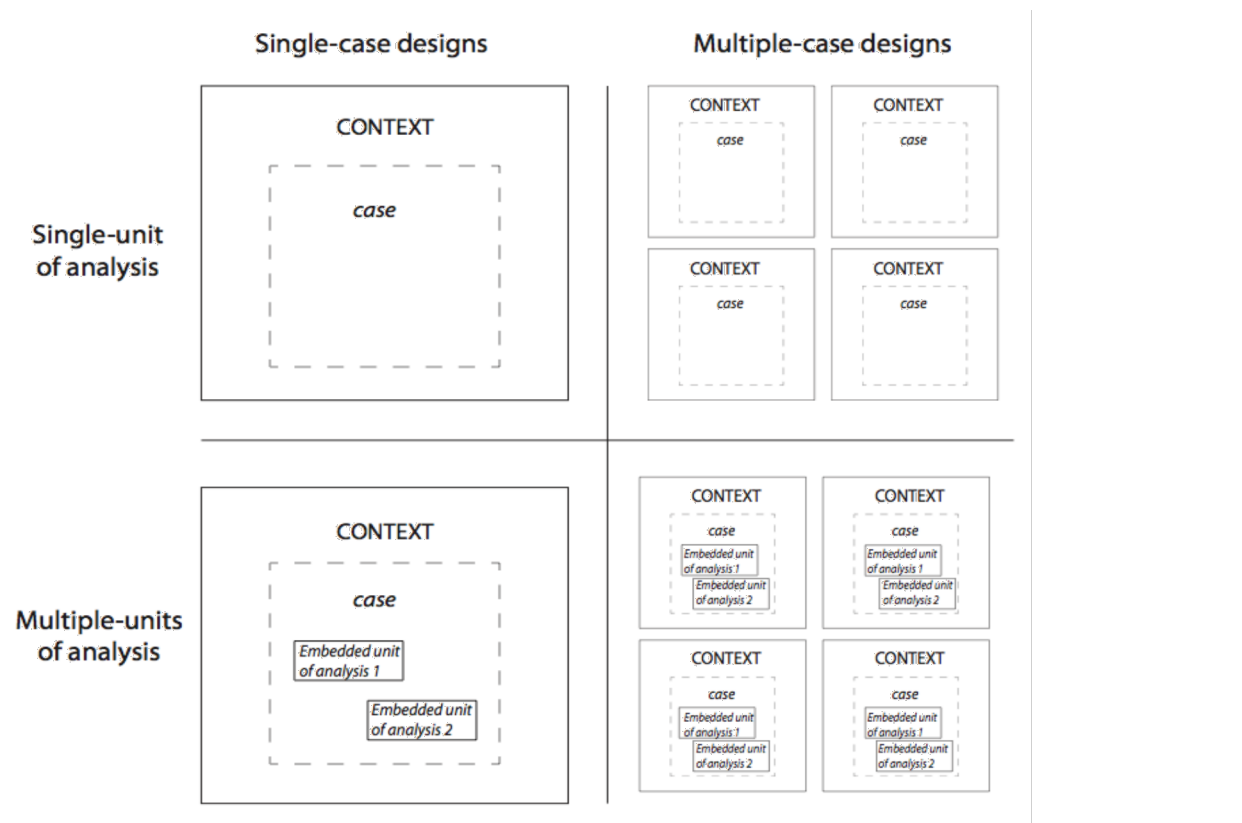
⁶⁷ Yin, R. 2009:4

⁶⁸ Treadwell, D. 2011:206

opportunity to understand something in depth⁶⁹, whereas the disadvantages are in the lack of generalization possibilities and control of the variables. The purpose of this study is descriptive and concerns an undiscovered area of crisis communication. Therefore, the advantage of understanding something in depth and increasing the understanding of crisis communication, outweighs the ability of generalization and controlling the variables.

According to Yin, case study research includes both single-case studies and multiple-case studies⁷⁰ and the difference between the two is subtle. Esaiasson et al. argue that as soon as one uses several analytical units in a study, the difference between a comparable study/multi-case study and single case study is not very easy to define, but that the difference lies in if the empirical data comes from one or different contexts⁷¹. In a similar way, Yin separates four different case study designs using two dimensions; single-case-multi-case designs and single-units of analysis-multiple units of analysis⁷² (see Figure 3.1.1 below).

Figure 3.1.1.1 Basic Types of Designs for Case Studies



Source: Yin, R. 2009:46

Comment: The figure illustrates a matrix of Yin's four different case study designs. Yin uses two dimensions: Single-case versus multiple-case and Single unit of analysis versus multiple units of analysis.

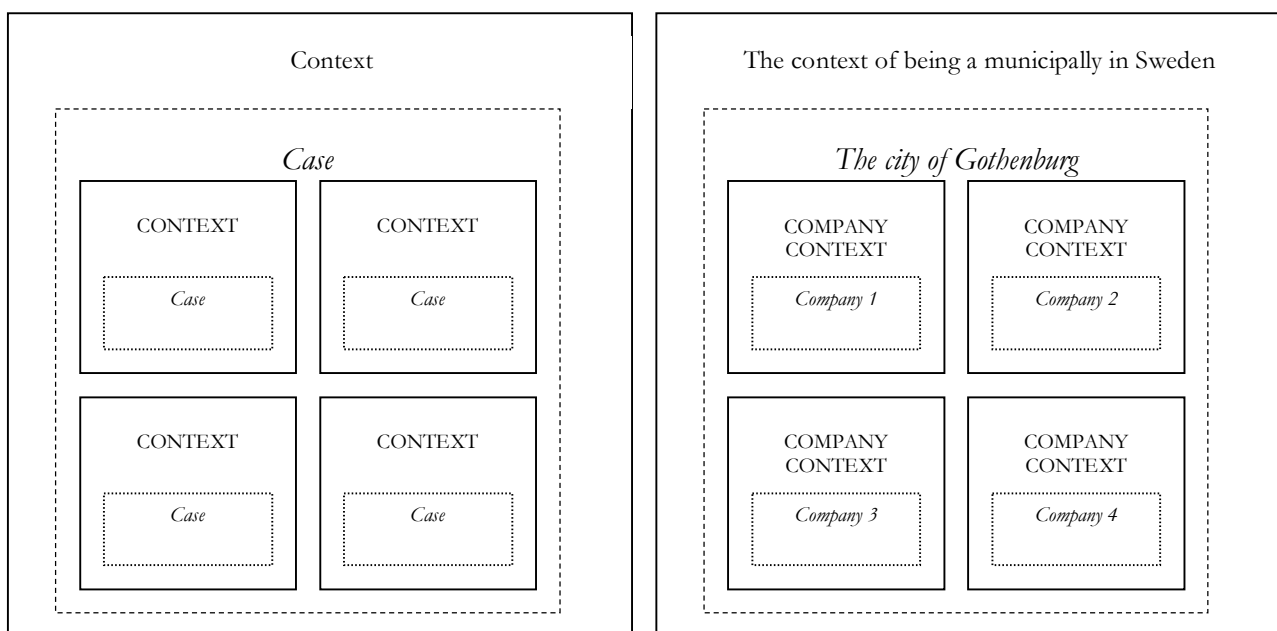
⁶⁹ Yin, R. 2009:18

⁷⁰ Yin, R. 2009:19

⁷¹ Esaiasson, P., Gilljam, M., Oscarsson, H., Wängnerud, L. 2012:276

This study is a combination of Yin’s multiple-case design with single-unit of analysis and the single-case design with multiple units of analysis. The reason for choosing a combination of the two case study designs is because of the complexity of the case studied. In fact, the municipally owned companies of Gothenburg have since the fall of 2010 suffered from several crises regarding different bribery scandals and accounting frauds. This happening have most definitely affected the context of being a municipally owned company in Gothenburg, not only because of the damage it might have cost the city and the municipally companies, but also that these scares together have created a unique scandal of the city that is not comparable to any other governmental scandal in Sweden. Studying the internal crisis communication strategies of the municipally owned companies in Gothenburg, it is not possible to ignore the fact of the bribery scandals and thereby the context of being a municipally owned company of the city. However, the municipally owned companies in Gothenburg are very independent, run themselves and are very different. For example they work in different fields of activities, have different missions and business ideas, varies when it comes to sales and turnover, and also they have different numbers of employees and different organizational cultures. The fact that the analytical units are so different makes it impossible to ignore the organizational context while studying this case. Thereby, within the context of being a municipally owned company in the city of Gothenburg, also the organizational context will be taken in mind while studying my analytical units. Figure 3.1.2 below illustrates the case study design that will be used in this study.

Figure 3.1.1.2 – My Case Study Design



Comment: The figure illustrates the case study design that is used for this study. Two contexts needs to be taken into account, because of the complexity of the case chosen for the study.

3.1.2 Case selection

The reason for choosing the city of Gothenburg and its municipally owned companies as the case and population for this study was because of the thesis subjects' topicality, i.e. crisis communication, in the city and also the uniqueness of this case as the municipally is the first in Sweden to suffer from scandals and crises of this kind. As well as this study is about a quite unknown area of crisis communication, choosing a case with the favorable circumstance that crisis communication is an up to date topic, for finding internal crisis communication strategies seems reasonable. Also as the understanding of different internal crisis communication strategies are very limited, the fact that the municipally owned companies in Gothenburg, i.e. my units of analysis, are very different in terms of fields of activities, number of employees, sales and turnover etc. have been considered to be favorable in terms of selecting a case.

3.2 Methodology & Material

3.2.1 The Interviews

When studying a research area that we have limited information about and therefore are not able to predict the answer to our research question, interviews are a good method for the empirical data⁷³. Kvale and Brinkman explains that when we think the parts of the ideas and knowledge that we wish to reach exist within a person, the researchers role is to “dig nuggets of the knowledge out of a subject’s pure experiences.”⁷⁴ Against this background, interviews were chosen as the method for empirical data in this study and during the period of March 27th and April 20th 2012, eleven interviews were conducted. The interviewees were with Communication Managers of the different municipally owned companies in Gothenburg, all in working positions of power and influence in the organizations and most importantly, having first-hand information about the company’s communication strategies. The interviewees spoke for themselves and the strategies of their specific company, which means they functioned as respondents rather than informants. For a more detailed information about the respondents and the companies they represented, see Appendix 1.

According to Treadwell there are three different types of interview structures. First, there is the fully structured interview where the interviewer has determined the important questions, the format of them and the order to ask them. Second, the semi-structured interviews where the questions to be asked also is determined in advance, but where the interviewer has the

⁷³ Esaiasson, P. 2012:253

⁷⁴ Marshall, C. Rossman, G. 2011:144

opportunity to change certain questions or follow up with other questions. Third, unstructured interviews also exist, where the interviewer uses more open-end questions to understand a phenomenon in the interviewees' terms. What determines which interviews structure one should use in a study is the research purpose and questions.⁷⁵ In this study, the semi-structured type of interviews were chosen, which resulted in the fact that I as the interviewer, used an interview guide during the conversation but felt free to focus on certain questions and able to follow-up on questions that I wanted the interviewee to explain further, or to clarify. The interviews were chosen to be semi-structured because of the lack of scientific knowledge in internal crisis communication, but also because the municipally owned companies in Gothenburg are very different and I assumed both the organizations to work differently with communication as well as the Communication Managers' role to vary in the different organizations. To read the interview guide used for this study, see Appendix 2.

The fact that the interviewees were Communication Managers means the interviews conducted were elite interviews, using Marshall and Rossmans' definition of elite individuals being "influential, prominent and/or well-informed in an organization"⁷⁶. There are both advantages and disadvantages with interviews of this kind, and the advantages are that the information gained from an elite interview is often very valuable, because of the position they hold within the organization. As well an elite interviewee have the knowledge to discuss an organization's policies, histories and plans. The greatest potential disadvantage doing elite interviews is that the interviewee might exaggerate or minimize his or her role discussing the company, if he or she has something to gain for it⁷⁷. As well, using interviews as methodology, the "effect of the interviewer"⁷⁸, i.e. the potential that the answers are affected by who is questioning them, must be taken into account. In this study, choosing not to discuss specific crisis but using a more general approach as well as being aware of this problematic, have been ways to minimize the negative effects.

⁷⁵ Treadwell, D. 2011:165

⁷⁶ Marshall, C. Rossman, G. 2011:155

⁷⁷ Marshall, C. & Rossman, G. 2011:155-156

⁷⁸ Esaiasson, P. Gilljam, M., Oscarsson, H. Wängnerud, L 2012:301

3.2.2 Selection of respondents & Interview procedure

For this study, a total sample of the population was used. This means that all municipally owned companies were asked and supposed to participate in the study⁷⁹. All 24 Communication Managers of the municipally owned companies in Gothenburg (described on their website⁸⁰) were contacted by email and questioned to participate as interviewees. Those who did not apply on the email was also contacted by phone and asked if they could participate. In total, eleven interviews of approximately 40-50 minutes were conducted with representatives from eleven municipally owned companies. The interviewees and the companies they represent are anonymous in this study and this anonymity was expressed to the interviewees both in the introducing email and in the beginning of the interview. The interviews were conducted in Swedish and later on transcribed in Swedish. The citations from the interviews used in this thesis are own, direct translations to English from the transcriptions. The interviewees are, in this study, referred to as Communication Managers, which is not the correct title for all the respondents (for example one is titles Information Officer and another is in fact the CEO of the municipally owned company). The reasons for using this title and also the same title for all respondents was to keep the anonymity of the interviewees and also because they all, regardless their title, are the head of the communication department of the company they represent.

Out of the eleven interviewees, eight were women and three men. The years of experience within the communication field varied between the interviewees from less than ten years to thirty years and the educational degree also varied, even if a majority of the respondents were highly educated on a university level. The interviewees work tasks were in the interviews described to be quite similar and included both the external and internal communication of the company. However, the responsibility within the work tasks varied among the respondents, as some communication departments only included the respondent whereas other were in charge of and had line management responsibilities.

3.3 Validity & Reliability

The validity of a research study is often described in terms of internal validity and external validity, where the former is associated to the credibility of the researcher and the trustworthiness in the study⁸¹ and the latter the generalizability of the study⁸². In qualitative research, the concept

⁷⁹ Esaiasson, P., Gilljam, M., Oscarsson, H. Wangerud, L. 2012:172

⁸⁰ The website of the municipally of Gothenburg

⁸¹ Esaiasson, P., Gilljam, M., Oscarsson, H. Wangerud, L. 2012:63-64

of theoretical saturation is also used, in attempt to measure if any additional data in the study would have changed or just result in more of the same findings.⁸³ In this study, several actions have been made in attempt to increase the internal validity: First, the interviews were conducted in the respondents work settings, at their work place and thereby in their own comfort zone. Also, since the interview guide was semi-structured, there were opportunities for both follow-up questions and also some small talk, to make the interviewee more comfortable and less affected by having someone interviewing him/her about how they work. Second, the interviews have been transcribed carefully and the answers were compared in a chart (see Appendix 3) in order to make sure it was the answers and not impressions that were used as the foundation of the result. With regards to the theoretical saturation, eleven interviews were held for this study and it is impossible to know if another dozen would have changed or enhanced the findings of the study. This because some answers were quite consistent whereas others showed a wider variety. However, a total sample of the population was used when selecting the respondents and eleven was the number of interviews that could be carried out during the period of time of this thesis work.

The external validity and the generalizability of the study is in itself not as good for qualitative research as for quantitative research⁸⁴, and it is not possible to generalize the result of this study to neither municipally owned companies in Sweden nor other companies. This is because the study is a case study and did not have the objective to generalize but instead to describe the implications of internal crisis communication, based on the case chosen, in order to increase the knowledge in the fields of internal crisis communication.

When evaluating research studies, it is also possible to look at the reliability of the study, which includes the lack of systematic and unsystematic errors when conducting the empirical data and analyzing the result⁸⁵. In this study, the fact that the interviews have been recorded, transcribed and analyzed through a chart increases the reliability of the study. However, it is not possible to ignore the fact that when conducting qualitative research, the researcher is part of the analytical instrument, which affects the objectivity.

⁸² Creswell, J. 2009:190

⁸³ Marschall, C. & Rossman, G. 2011:220

⁸⁴ Creswell, J. 2009:190

⁸⁵ Esaiasson, P., Gilljam, M., Oscarsson, H. Wangerud, L. 2012:63-64

4. ANALYTICAL PROCEDURE

Since the academic field of internal crisis communication is not yet a developed area and few studies have been conducted on the issue, this study aims to take some first steps into developing existing crisis communication theory toward a more internal aspect. Thus, when conducting the analysis of this study, a grounded theory technique was used. A more detailed description of why this technique was selected and how the analysis was conducted will follow below.

4.1 Grounded theory

Grounded theory is one of the most used analytical frameworks for qualitative research⁸⁶ and defined as “theory that has derived from data, systematically gathered and analyzed through the research process. In this method data collection, analysis and eventual theory stand in close relationship to one another.”⁸⁷ This means that using a grounded theory technique; one is developing theory out of data and also that the data collection and analysis is proceed almost in parallel.

Conducting the analysis, the data (the transcribed interviews) was broken down into components and given names. In the analysis these names were called categories and a different number of categories was found in different parts of the interviews. Theoretically, this process is called coding and described as one of the most essential processes of grounded theory⁸⁸. Coding the material can be done in different ways and for this study an open coding approach was chosen, which is “the process of breaking down, examining, comparing, conceptualizing and categorizing data.”⁸⁹ The reason for choosing this type of coding was because of this thesis descriptive purpose, as other types of coding practices gives a more explanatory result.

4.2 Method of analysis

For the procedure of analysis, Esaiasson et al’s proposal of line of actions was used, which means analyzing interviews qualitatively is made in two steps: First, the material is summarized and later

⁸⁶ Bryman, A. 2008:11

⁸⁷ Straus, A., Corbin, J. 1998:12

⁸⁸ Bryman, A. 2011:578

⁸⁹ Ibid

the analysis is conducted.⁹⁰ Like already mentioned, this analysis was not conducted in such linear way as Esaiasson et al's description but instead also done continuously during the interviews. However, after the interviews were transcribed, they were summarized in a table chart where the answers to the different questions were summarized and comparable to one another. Using this chart (for a full view, see Appendix 3), the grounded theory technique of coding and creating categories was done on the different themes within the interviews. When the categories were created, the deductive features of this study was carried out, comparing the categories with crisis communication and public relation theories described in the theoretical framework of this thesis, in order to take some few steps of developing existing crisis communication theory in a more internal direction.

⁹⁰ Esaiasson, P. Gilljam, M., Oscarsson, H. Wängerud, L 2012:301

5. RESULTS & DISCUSSION

In order to discuss and answer my research question of “*What are the implications of internal crisis communication?*” three main aspects, including several questions from the interview guide will be reported and discussed below. Three questions will illustrate the aspects: What is a crisis for the municipally owned companies in Gothenburg, What is communicated in a crisis situation in the municipally owned companies in Gothenburg? And In a crisis situation, how do the municipally owned companies in Gothenburg communicate with the employees? With these questions, the results from the interviews are described and a discussion about the respondents’ views of crisis, their approach of what should be communicated in crisis situations and also how they communicate with their employees in such situations, will be held.

5.1 What is a crisis for the municipally owned companies in Gothenburg?

5.1.1 Crisis as an effect or an experience

In the empirical data of this study, two different descriptions of crisis as a phenomenon exist. These can be described as “crisis as effects” and “crisis as experiences” and should not be seen as dichotomous categories as they are not mutually exclusive. For the first category, the respondents described crisis by what it can cause the company or lead to⁹¹. One Communication Manager of this category described crisis as follows: *“It is something that affects the business, something that radically changes our work and its circumstances. A crisis can also affect the image of the company.”*⁹² Within this category there are examples of both respondents who literally said that crisis is a matter of negative effects⁹³, and others who described it through effects in general, without saying if these are necessarily negative or not⁹⁴.

In the second category, “crisis as experiences”, the interviewees defined crisis through examples of actual events. Several respondents explained crisis to be of two kinds; an accident or a loss of confidence⁹⁵. One Communication Manager described it as following; *“Fires, flooding and similar things, the fact that a top management executive dies or a communicative crisis”*⁹⁶, explaining the latter to be when someone express themselves in an inappropriate way for the company. The experiences

⁹¹ Respondent 1, Respondent 4, Respondent 5, Respondent 10, Respondent 11

⁹² Respondent 5

⁹³ Respondent 10, Respondent 11

⁹⁴ Respondent 1, Respondent 4, Respondent 5

⁹⁵ Respondent 2, Respondent 3, Respondent 6, Respondent 7, Respondent 8, Respondent 9

⁹⁶ Respondent 8

that the respondent exemplified did often come from own experiences within the company, as several respondents gave examples of how they had handled such crisis, in the conversation. Notably, all experiences were not real-life experiences, but also scenarios that the manager had come across or been trained for. For example, the Communication Manager who's citation is mentioned above, explained why she mentioned a crisis to be if a senior executive died, in the following way: *"It (a crisis) can for example be if our CEO dies, we have had crisis scenarios about that,"*⁹⁷ referring to internal crisis workshops the company has had.

The two different categories can be related to different approaches regarding how crisis are defined, which was explained in the theoretical framework of this study. Describing crisis based on what effects such can result in, goes in line with the organization-centered approach of crisis and corresponds well to Fearn-Bank's definition of the phenomenon that "a crisis is a major occurrence with a potentially negative outcome affecting an organization, company, industry, as well as its publics, products, services, or good name."⁹⁸ When describing crisis this way an "inside-out" approach is used, describing how it affects the organization. The potential but not definitive negative outcome of crisis, shared by both Fearn-Banks and Steven Fink, is also something mentioned during the interviews, through descriptions of how a crisis can develop the company to the better⁹⁹ and create cohesive teams¹⁰⁰. *"When I started working here, there were many negative articles about [the company name]. We were in a crisis of trust and we felt very attacked. But we discussed it a lot and I really feel like it made our organization stronger. We discussed what we do and why we do this."*¹⁰¹

To describe crisis in terms of experience is more related to the stakeholder approach of defining crisis than the organization-centered approach. Describing experiences makes one think back on actual events that were labeled as crisis by a stakeholder. Using examples, like *"it is an event where people are hurt, when buildings are destroyed, or a crisis of trust"*¹⁰² is a stakeholder approach of defining the phenomena, as the situation is viewed in an "outside in" approach, describing what happens or what started the crisis, rather than how the organization was affected. Notably, who the stakeholders is, is not defined and might be within the company itself but can also be external actors. This is showed in the example where the interviewee describes a CEO death as a crisis, because it was used as a scenario in a crisis workshop. In that case the scenario writer is the stakeholder as he/she concretized crisis in such way.

⁹⁷ Respondent 8

⁹⁸ Fearn-Banks, K. 2002:2

⁹⁹ Respondent 9

¹⁰⁰ Respondent 4

¹⁰¹ Ibid

¹⁰² Respondent 7

In the exemplification and experiential crisis descriptions, answers describing a development of the crisis approach are also identified. *“With the experience we have today, we have changed our approach toward what a crisis is. Before 2010 we said that a crisis was something that happened in our operation, a major hold-up. We were very focus on our basic operations and a crisis was if our clients or the public was affected. After 2010, we have understood that a crisis can be very related to individuals and individuals’ behavior,”*¹⁰³ a respondent said during an interview and referred to the scandal within the “Bribery Scandal” in the city that her company was involved in. This quote includes an notable and important aspect of both the category of explaining crisis as experiences, but also the stakeholder approach of crisis, since the mindset somehow implies that new experiences of crisis also leads to wider definitions of what a crisis is, which is the case of this organization and the quote. Using this perspective, a company would never be prepared for a crisis that they have not before seen as a crisis (like the example the respondent mentioned above), simply because the lack of experiencing the situation makes it not to be labeled as a crisis. Unlike the category of “crisis as effects” and the organization-centered approach, describing crisis through experiences makes it dynamic and new experiences means new interpretations and understandings of what it is.

5.1.2 Preventable in different ways

In the interviews there is a unity regarding the possibility to prevent crisis, but the responses differ when asking them to explain how this is done. Four different categories can be identified among the respondents; “identifying risks,¹⁰⁴” “detecting signals,¹⁰⁵” “not creating one yourself.¹⁰⁶” and “having routines.¹⁰⁷”

The two categories of “identifying risks” and “detecting signals” are in one way quite similar, as both includes an assumption that potential crisis always exist for the company. The difference between the categories lies in the method of preventing them, where identifying risks can be seen as a proactive method and catching up warning signals is a more reactive approach. *“Unexpected events always exist but can be prevented just by being aware of the existence of the risk and identifying it beforehand,”*¹⁰⁸ was said during one of the interviews, and this citation reflects the proactive way of thinking in crisis prevention in this category, where the company searches for risks and crisis in order to be prepared. For the category “detecting signals” the strategy is more about using

¹⁰³ Respondent 2

¹⁰⁴ Respondent 8, Respondent 10, Respondent 12

¹⁰⁵ Respondent 2, Respondent 4, Respondent 9

¹⁰⁶ Respondent 5, Respondent 10

¹⁰⁷ Respondent 1, Respondent 3, Respondent 7, Respondent 11

¹⁰⁸ Respondent 8

antennas and being observant for crisis indications. One respondent described how to prevent a crisis in the following way: *“What is very important, is to capture the crisis signals and large companies have not got used to this. They receive many signals, and it is not possible to say that a media hunt is unpredictable.”*¹⁰⁹

The similarity and difference between the category of “identifying risks” and “detecting signals” correspond to the relationship between Fink’s and Mitroff’s crisis theories. Fink, who’s theory advocates to actively be heedful of crisis prodromes in order to prevent crisis, would most probably prefer the “detecting signals” category before the “identifying risks”, whereas Mitroff, who says crisis risks always are present and emphasizes to actively intercept these risk, would prefer the opposite. Another difference between the two categories lies in whether the responsibility or possibility of preventing crisis lies on the organization itself or individuals. Being observant for early signals that the “detecting signals“ imply, becomes a question of recruitments for an organization, since it is up to individuals to detect and also handle relevant signals in the right way. The category of “identifying risks” is more of a regular practice of the organization, even if this practice also includes individual judgments, as some employees need to have the work task in one way or another.

The third category, “not creating one yourself,” refers to the importance of having both reliable employees, well-executed security systems and trying to avoid that something goes wrong. *“It is possible to try to avoid crisis by making sure it is not created within the company itself. For example, we are currently working with creating a new computer system, (...) and by working smart and making things properly and correct it is possible to prevent (a potential crisis regarding the system),”*¹¹⁰ a Communication Manager said and also argued that it is possible to prevent employees from making inappropriate things by having rules and policies that the employees are aware of. The action of trying to avoid any errors is also related to having reliable employees and making sure they know what they can and cannot do. In the interviews it was also mentioned that an organization could learn from other companies in crisis situations by making sure the mistakes others did was not repeated within the own organization. One respondent explained as follows, talking about a crisis for a similar business, which emerged from an inappropriate message on Facebook: *“When such things (crisis) happen, my boss or the board of directors get scared and it (the issue) is put on my table. And then I need to look through our guidelines and create a policy pointing out what our employees can do in social medias and not. And it is important to handle this well, not to point a stick but focusing on explaining the situation. To ask them (the*

¹⁰⁹ Respondent 2

¹¹⁰ Respondent 5

employees) if they have read about this, and explain that it is possible to avoid this problem. Explain that I have, on our company's behalf, developed some paragraphs and if they follow these, nothing like this can happen."¹¹¹

The final category of "having routines" is related to the description of crisis as experiences, as routines can be considered to evolve from experiences (own or others). One respondent said: *"The effect of the crisis is preventable and I think we have become much better in handling crisis. We did not do that before, and it was obvious when we were in that crisis situation, but today I think we know what to do, we are prepared,"*¹¹² referring to a crisis situation included in the "Bribery Scandal" of 2010. However, having routines does not necessary mean you have been in a crisis, which is showed when the data was analyzed. It can also be a matter of well-thought, planned routines. *"There is proactive work in just thinking a bit before hand. Who does what in a crisis situation?"*¹¹³ was said during one interview, arguing that division of labor and clear directions of what to do in a crisis situation was important to have within any organization.

The preventable work of not creating a crisis yourself and to have routines is not mentioned in neither Fink's nor Mitroff's pre-crisis stages of crisis. However, it is possible to argue that these types of preventional work are effects of warning signals or risk identification. As in the example mentioned above, the Communication Manager explaining how they use internal communication in order to try to avoid a similar Facebook crisis that a similar business went trough, the risk of the crisis was in an earlier stage identified when it was read about. And for having routines and think a bit before hand, the company at some point must have accepted that a crisis, and maybe also a specific crisis, can occur. Fink argues that just knowing the existence of a prodrome helps the company be prepared for a crisis and thereby also has a greater possibility handle it better¹¹⁴, and the categories of "not creating one yourself" and "having routines" could be seen as an outcome of such way of thinking.

Even if different techniques or methods of how to prevent for crisis are identified in the empirical material, the view of seeing crisis as preventable is agreed among the respondent. So is also the need to do preventable work and thinking things through beforehand, thoughts that promotes the existence for crisis strategies and crisis communication strategies, regardless if these concern external or internal publics.

¹¹¹ Respondent 10

¹¹² Respondent 7

¹¹³ Respondent 11

¹¹⁴ Fink, S. 1986:25

5.1.3 Stoppable, not stoppable or sometimes stoppable

Discussing whether it is possible not only to prepare for crisis but also to make a crisis disappear, the respondents' opinions are dissembled into seeing crisis as stoppable¹¹⁵ and not stoppable¹¹⁶. A third, intermediate category of the idea that "some crisis are stoppable, others not" was also identified.

The category of "crises are stoppable" included ideas that if one handles a crisis correctly, it is possible to make it disappear. *"It is possible to make a crisis disappear by being honest"*¹¹⁷ was said during one interview, and another respondent agreed: *"By handling it (the crisis) in the right way, one can make it stop and not to proceed."*¹¹⁸ The requirement for stopping a crisis was within this category described to be dependent of what kind of crisis it was, what had happened and what was communicated from the organization. The opposite idea, that crisis are not stoppable, was also found in the empirical material. One Communication Manager said: *"It is not possible to control a crisis. However, it is possible to ride with the 'wave' that a crisis is. The ride can be done in a good or a bad way."*¹¹⁹ Experiences were also mentioned within this category, as several respondent referred to own experience when arguing crisis were uncontrollable. *"You have to ride out the crisis. We know that now, from experience,"*¹²⁰ one interviewee explained.

A third approach was that some crises were stoppable whereas others were not. *"It depends on what the crisis is about, you have a certain acting space but it is limited, one respondent explained."*¹²¹ The respondents in this category used different division between crises, focusing on either if the crisis resulted from something that started inside or the outside of the company (a division between internal and external crises¹²²), or the content of the crisis, such as "Suspected crimes"¹²³, "Accidents"¹²⁴ "Crisis of trust"¹²⁵ and "Communication crisis,"¹²⁶ (when someone within the company has communicated something false or inappropriate). A scale division of crises was also identified, where the respondent differentiated incidents, crisis and social crisis¹²⁷. In the approach that some crises are stoppable and others are not, two arguments of which crisis were stoppable were found. First, accidents were not considered stoppable by the respondents, since

¹¹⁵ Respondent

¹¹⁶ Respondent 3, Respondent 4, Respondent 6, Respondent 7, Respondent 9, Respondent 10

¹¹⁷ Respondent 2

¹¹⁸ Respondent 8

¹¹⁹ Respondent 10

¹²⁰ Respondent 4

¹²¹ Respondent 7

¹²² Respondent 5, Respondent 6

¹²³ Respondent 3, Respondent 8

¹²⁴ Respondent 1, Respondent 2, Respondent 3, Respondent 4, Respondent 7, Respondent 8

¹²⁵ Respondent 4, Respondent 7

¹²⁶ Respondent 11

¹²⁷ Respondent 9

when you are handling that kind of crisis the event of it has already happened and you are only managing the aftershock of it.¹²⁸ Second, internal crisis were seen as more controllable since they are actually within the organization, and thereby also more stoppable.¹²⁹

The view of seeing crisis as unstoppable waves that need to be ridden corresponds Coombs, Fink and Mitroff's views of seeing crisis as processes, whereas the opposite opinion of the respondents is harder to compare to the crisis communication theories included in this thesis. However, Fink did in his theory argue that all crises did not include all of his four stages, which also corresponds the identification of the category: "some crises are stoppable whereas others are not," which implies that certain types of crises could be stoppable. However, it is possible to question if the stoppable crises only includes a certain number of stages, or if it is possible to make a crisis disappear and thereby ensure the crisis to only include certain stages?

The different divisions of crisis, used within the category of seeing only some crisis as stoppable, are to some extent comparable with Coomb's and Sharlif et al's descriptions of how crises are of different kinds. The dichotomous division between internal or external, where the source of the crisis determines if it belongs to one or the other, is identified in the interviews and also present in the literature of both authors (even if Sharif et al call it community and non-community crisis).¹³⁰ Thus, Coomb uses the division of internal and external crisis as only one out of two dimensions for four different types of crisis, a fact that is not present in the empirical material. For the interviewees, different kinds of crisis include exemplifications and concretizations of crisis, such as "suspected crimes," "accidents," and "crisis of trust" and "communication crisis." These are all covered in Coombs's matrix, but notably the divisions only covers types of crisis that has been experienced by the companies themselves or their sister companies.

5.1.4 Having different views of crisis - when is internal crisis communication used?

The result of the interviews includes several different definitions and descriptions of what a crisis really is and consist of, how they are preventable, and also if crises, or at least some of them, are stoppable or not. Looking through the interview answers, it is not possible to find any pattern with regards to the respondents' different genders, work experiences, crisis experiences or size of the company, in terms of giving the different descriptions/using different categories. No explanatory findings or even indications of such can therefore be made out of the material.

¹²⁸ Respondent 6

¹²⁹ Respondent 5

¹³⁰ Shaluf, I. Ahmadun, F., Mat Sad, A., 2003:24-32 & Coombs, T. 1995:454-455

Having a number of different descriptions of the phenomenon, makes it possible to question when crisis communication actually is used, since the definitions and views of crisis are different in different organizations. A crisis for an organization does not necessary have to be a crisis for another company, and thereby crisis communication is used in different situations for different organizations. For this reason, it is not possible to clarify exactly in which situations internal crisis communication is practiced, aside from the fact that it should be in (the quite vague concept of) crisis situations. However, all respondents do express a need and/or requirement to communicate with the employees in crisis situations,¹³¹ regardless of which definition of crisis the company practice.

5.2 What is communicated in a crisis situation for the municipally owned companies in Gothenburg?

5.2.1 Crisis strategies to inform key individuals or delegate responsibility

Regarding the use of strategies in crisis situations, two different ways to work were identified in the interviews, since some respondents explained that they did not use any specific crisis strategy, but handled crisis as normal occurrences¹³², whereas others had specific crisis strategies and routines¹³³. *“We work with communication plans. (...) It has become our way to work and it is very good. And we handle them (crises) differently because the plan is like a model. (...) Sometimes it is really simple and I can reduce several titles in the plan because I don’t need them. If there are no risks, I can reduce that in the plan. We don’t need a strategy, instead we map for ourselves how we should handle it. (...) And it does not have to be about a problem, but we use it just to find out how to communicate about different issues,”*¹³⁴ was explained by one respondent who’s company does not have specific crisis strategies or plans.

However, other respondent made it clear that they had specific crisis routines and policies that only was used in crisis situations. These could be divided into two categories: “Checklist”¹³⁵ and “Delegation of responsibility.”¹³⁶ To the first category, ideas about using a “to do”-list was used as a crisis strategy, focusing on informing key persons within the organization (and sometimes external stakeholders as well) about the situation. *“We have a security manual, (...) and have included the communicative aspects of a crisis in it, (to inform) insurance companies, the Communication Manager, the*

¹³¹ Respondent 1, Respondent 2, Respondent 3, Respondent 4, Respondent 5, Respondent 6, Respondent 7, Respondent 8, Respondent 9, Respondent 10, Respondent 11

¹³² Respondent 1, Respondent 3, Respondent 4, Respondent 5

¹³³ Respondent 2, Respondent 4, Respondent 6, Respondent 7, Respondent 8, Respondent 9, Respondent 10

¹³⁴ Respondent 1

¹³⁵ Respondent 2, Respondent 7, Respondent 8

¹³⁶ Respondent 4, Respondent 6, Respondent 8, Respondent 9, Respondent 10

tenants and so on.”¹³⁷ Within the other category, “Delegation of responsibility,” the interviewees explained that in a crisis strategy, there is a division of labor between key persons within the organization. One respondent explain their routines in the following way, when he is asked if they have a crisis strategy: *“Yes. We have a specific crisis management team that includes a number of people, including myself. (...) The person who is responsible for the security is also in the group, as well as the Vice President and so on, all (members are) on a high level of the organization. (...) There is a division between us in the group. I am responsible for the external communication. Our Security Manager is of course responsible for the contact with the police or security service. And we also have one who is responsible for the internal dimension, the employees; maybe someone needs to be taken care of. And we also have someone who is responsible for contacting the leaders of the city.”*¹³⁸ Like the citation implies, the category of “Delegating responsibility” includes some features of internal crisis communication, because responsibility toward the employees was delegated in the crisis strategies for some of the companies¹³⁹.

The different views of whether a crisis requires a crisis strategy or not, as well as how a crisis strategy should be designed, accentuate the findings that crisis are defined, described and also handled in different ways in different organizations. When relating this to internal crisis communication, the issue of how internal crisis communication is different from “regular” internal communication might be raised. Is it the fact that internal crisis communication is exercised in crisis, or the fact that it is different from the ordinary internal communication? The perspective used in this thesis is the former, that internal crisis communication is internal communication in crisis situations, regardless of how a crisis is described or not. In the organizations that handles crisis as normal occurrences, the internal crisis communication strategies are equivalent the internal communication strategies, simply because crisis management does not include any extraordinary work.

5.2.2 Sending a message of openness and control

When the respondents were asked to describe what’s important to communicate in a crisis situation, the answers were about the message they wanted their company to send, in terms of giving a certain impression. Two different (not dichotomous) categories of impressions were identified in the material: “Openness,”¹⁴⁰ and “Control.”¹⁴¹ In addition, ideas about what are

¹³⁷ Respondent 8

¹³⁸ Respondent 6

¹³⁹ Respondent 4, Respondent 6, Respondent 8

¹⁴⁰ Respondent 1, Respondent 2, Respondent 7, Respondent 11

¹⁴¹ Respondent 1, Respondent 3, Respondent 4, Respondent 5, Respondent 6, Respondent 8, Respondent 9, Respondent 11

important to communicate depends on the crisis and that no specific plans therefore can be expressed was also identified in the empirical material.¹⁴²

The first category, “Openness,” includes ideas that one needs to be honest in crisis situations and also to give all the information there is. In that way the receiver will see the organization as a transparent one. A Communication Manager said: *“It is important that no information is withheld”*¹⁴³ and another respondent agreed: *“Because of our experience, I know that it is very important to be honest about the situation. And if something incorrectly has occurred, it is important to admit it. I think people understand that people can make mistakes.”*¹⁴⁴ Among the respondents, it is argued that the companies do not only want to express this openness to a public, but also have to do it because of the principle of public access to official records¹⁴⁵ that exist in Sweden, which is a policy the companies need to follow as they are in the public sector. In other words, they are obliged to have all information public, and thereby also towards the employees.

The second category named “Control” means the company should both communicate the facts of what has happened, their own actions made in the situation, and also their own story of what has happened. *“It is important to address what has happened, why it happened (...), and what is done to solve the problem,”*¹⁴⁶ was explained during one interview and another respondent agreed: *“The facts of what has happened are most important. And also think through, what you want to communicate, to create your view of the issue.”*¹⁴⁷ The idea that it is important to keep a cool head when communicating in a crisis, in order to give correct and relevant information is also identified within this category. *“I think you need to be very calm when something happens, and not to panic. (...) It is one thing if someone has died in a shooting, then you can’t be calm. But in more administrative crisis, you need to be cool in your communication. (...) I think many people just panic because everything happens very fast and you feel like you need to answer the right things all the time, and then you say something spontaneously, not thought out that you should not have done if you got an hour or two just to think things through.”*¹⁴⁸ one respondent said during the interviews. The category of control also involves giving the impression of awareness when communicating in crisis, which respondents also mentioned in the interviews. *“Sometimes it is important just to share the information immediately, just to show you are aware of the problem, even if you don’t have all the answers. And this is hard, especially to convince people to say that they don’t know if they don’t know,”*¹⁴⁵ one respondent said.

¹⁴² Respondent 10

¹⁴³ Respondent 1

¹⁴⁴ Respondent 7

¹⁴⁵ Respondent 2

¹⁴⁶ Respondent 8

¹⁴⁷ Respondent 5

¹⁴⁸ Respondent 3

Sending a message of “openness” and “control,” that the respondents advocate, indicates an embrace of the crisis rather than thrusting it away. Some respondents presume in their answers that crises includes a fault within the organization and that it is important to tell the truth, be honest about if something has not been done correctly and not to panic, but think through the utterances from the company. Also, ideas to express the actions the company has taken to deal with the crisis are identified. This embracing perspective is comparable with Cornelissen’s strategies when a company is perceived to have a high level of responsibility of a crisis, and is using strategies of accepting and accommodating the crisis, rather than denying or distancing yourself from the crisis, which according to Cornelissen are strategies used when a company is perceived to have a low level of responsibility of the crisis¹⁴⁹.

It is possible to speculate about why the respondents use this kind of approach of crisis, and again the reason of experience might be raised. For the municipally owned companies that were involved in the crises of the “Bribery Scandal,” strategies of denial and avoidance, was during the interviews expressed to have been used without success. One respondent says: *“We got very criticized when our CEO didn’t want to do an interview with (the TV program revealing the crisis), and that was not a good way to go. So now we know, that is not a good way to go, you just need to face it (the crisis). And if something is wrong, just admit it. It is much better to do it in that way,”*¹⁵⁰ explaining how they have changed their strategy of how to manage a crisis. Notably, the example used in this quote was a kind of crisis where the company was perceived to have high responsibility of the crisis but the strategy used was in Cornelissen’s terms be a nonexistence strategy of denial, a combination that according to Cornelissen would not be a match and in reality was not a success either. However, what the respondent explains is in fact that using a strategy that was not “the right way to go”¹⁵¹ means that the strategy will be another when the company faces another crisis. And thereby the strategy is more of trial and error, than well thought out.

What should not be forgotten is the additional ideas about not being able to express what is important to communicate in crisis in general, since different crisis require different strategies, which also is found in the empirical data. This view fully corresponds Coomb’s and Cornelissen’s theory that different crisis strategies should be used in different crisis situations. However, the respondent was not able to go into details of how the different crisis situations and belonging

¹⁴⁹ Cornelissen 2008: 226

¹⁵⁰ Respondent 7

¹⁵¹ Respondent 7

strategies were formed: *“The crisis are different and therefore I don’t think you can have strategies that makes you do one way or the other.”*¹⁵²

5.2.3 The same communication, but different in some situations

In the interviews, a unity regarding the content of information one should communicate internally and externally was found. The respondent argued that the information shared should be the same for both publics¹⁵³. *“My ambition is that the information should be the same internally and externally,”*¹⁵⁴ one respondent said and another agreed: *“It is important o share the same information to all parties involved.”*¹⁵⁵ However, different ideas were found about which public should be prioritized, where one perspective was to give priority to the employees whereas others focused on the external groups. *“The internal public needs to know it first. (...) It is important that the employees don’t get the information from for example a newspaper,”*¹⁵⁶ one respondent said, but did also mention that time constrains could sometimes result in parallel communication with both groups. And the contrary approach focused on the lack of time for specifically directed communication. *“In a crisis situation, you have to focus on the external public because this is the most important one. But it is also important to not forget the internal (public). When you publish a press release you can also put it on the intranet, the information does not have to be different because you don’t have time for that. (...) But it is important to also have the staff on board, otherwise you have employees who are not feeling well because their company is denigrated.”*¹⁵⁷ And even if the prioritization of the two publics differ between the respondents, the need to have a communication and a god dialogue with the employees in crisis situations, is expressed in all the interviews.

The opinion to strive for equal treatment of internal and external groups, split when going deeper on the issue and asking the respondent if there are any situations when they should choose not to communicate with the internal public of employees. The answers of this question can be divided into two categories: *“Regarding individuals”*¹⁵⁸ and *“Unclear proportion.”*¹⁵⁹ To the first category of *“Regarding individuals”* ideas that when the crisis is internal and individuals are concerned, the crisis becomes too personal and the issue should not be communicated. *“When it comes to our employees, we never mention names. It is not our job to judge our employees and therefore we should*

¹⁵² Respondent 10

¹⁵³ Respondent 1, Respondent 2, Respondent 3, Respondent 4, Respondent 5, Respondent 6, Respondent 7, Respondent 8, Respondent 9, Respondent 10

¹⁵⁴ Respondent 2

¹⁵⁵ Respondent 9

¹⁵⁶ Respondent 10

¹⁵⁷ Respondent 11

¹⁵⁸ Respondent 2, Respondent 6, Respondent 7, Respondent 8, Respondent 9

¹⁵⁹ Respondent 5

*not communicate about it. (...) But it is a fine line, because if it is reported to the police, we don't communicate about it, but if media calls I am saying we have reported it,*¹⁶⁰ one interviewee said and referred to if an employee was accused of doing something illegal or other irregularities. But another respondent disagrees, using the same example (an employee is suspected for a crime), but has a different viewpoint: *'Maybe (you should not communicate with the employees) when it is personal and thereby sensitive, but in those situations I still think you should try to say as much as possible, just to reduce the insecurity and anxiety that will be around the question anyway.'*¹⁶¹ Another respondent explains a third view: *'If someone is a crime suspect, you have to be very clear that it is just a suspicion. Then you should try to isolate the crisis and make sure the information is not spread.'*¹⁶²

The second category refers to an unclear proportion of the crisis, which means when it is unclear if this really is a crisis or not. *'Sometimes you don't know which proportion the crisis is, but as soon as you it will be substantial, you have to communicate about it,'*¹⁶³ was said during one interview. Another respondent shared a similar view: *'When it does not affect the working conditions you should not communicate about it. (...) You should say as little as possible, but if rumors start, you have to communicate everything you know.'*¹⁶⁴

The different views of when to communicate with your employees and when not to communicate, illustrate a problematic balance of supporting and accommodating the employees, that needs to be taken into account when practicing internal crisis communication in crisis situations where employees are involved or if the crisis has an unclear proportion. In one way, you should as an employer stand up for your employees and not judge them in case they potentially have done something wrong, and thereby not communicate about what is going on. But in another way, you need to satisfy the needs of the employees, i.e. make sure the insecurity and anxiety is decreased as much as possible, because you don't want the employees to feel worried or neglected by the company. This problematic balance exists within both the categories, in situations when internal and external groups should not be treated the same, as mentioned above. In the category of "Regarding individuals" the balance is between not judging/standing up for an individual and the employees right to know. And in the second category of "Unclear proportion" the balance is between not to worry the employees and not neglect the employees, as in one way you should not create an anxious working environment and make the employees worried if it is not necessary and also as a manager you don't want your employees to feel

¹⁶⁰ Respondent 2

¹⁶¹ Respondent 7

¹⁶² Respondent 8

¹⁶³ Respondent 11

¹⁶⁴ Respondent 5

ignored, like they did not matter to have the information. But how do you know when to communicate and not? When the respondents were asked about this, the answers were that it is hard to know what to do in such situations. *“You need to trust your guts about when you should communicate about it or not”*¹⁶⁵ one respondent said and another agreed: *“It is a difficult choice, when to tell and when not to.”*¹⁶⁶ Ideas of a difficulty in accommodating the employees as individuals when the crisis is about a colleague, regardless what you choose to tell the employees and what you choose not to tell, is also present in the interviews. *“People react in different ways, some wants to know all the details whereas others say ‘don’t tell me that, I don’t want to know.’ It is very hard to know what to say, I don’t think there is one answer, but needs to make a decision in every case,”*¹⁶⁷ one respondent said.

In the part of the interview where these issues of communicating about crisis that you don’t know the proportion of or involves an employee, the focus shift from the organizational, structured, strategic and almost systematic way of describing crisis management and the strategies used within the organization, towards a more individual, emotional-related and not-structured way of working in crisis management. It seems like in such situation, decisions of what to communicate or not are not made out of professional or strategic arguments but instead of emotional and humanistic ones, and the companies don’t have any clear guidelines or tactics on the issue. The crisis communication literature used in this thesis don’t include any balance factor between standing up for the public and accommodating the public that these findings illustrate, but instead affecting the audience to think what the organization wants them to think, or create an understanding between the organization and the public, by using different strategies.

5.3 In a crisis situation, how do the municipally owned companies in Gothenburg communicate with the employees?

5.3.1 Choosing the right communication channel

For the municipally owned companies studied in this study, the communication channels used in crisis communication can be divided into two main categories: “Channels for information” and “Channels for communication.”

The category of “Channels for information” consists of communication channels for one-way communication. Examples of channels of this kind, used to communicate with the employees in crisis management, are through an intranet or similar computer based channel, emails, text

¹⁶⁵ Respondent 8

¹⁶⁶ Respondent 6

¹⁶⁷ Respondent 5

messages/sms and other written information such as letters. There is a unity among the respondent to use these channels for internal crisis communication, primarily because in the lack of time in crisis situations. *“The intranet has a very important function in crisis situations, when we need to communicate (with our employees) promptly,”*¹⁶⁸ one respondent explained during an interview. The fact that everyone within the company has access and gets the same information through a one-way communication channel was also expressed as an advantage for using these channels in crisis situations¹⁶⁹.

The second category “Channels for communication” consist of two-way communication channels, where the receivers of information also have a chance to give feedback, ask questions etcetera to create a shared understanding between the sender and the receiver. Two examples of channels in this category, identified in the empirical material, are staff meetings¹⁷⁰ and social media channels¹⁷¹. Staff meetings can be both on a managerial level and between all employees in the company and the latter is the primarily channel used in crisis situations for all the municipally owned companies in this study. *“The best way to communicate in crisis situations is to get people together. (...) If it is something that affects the employees, you need to gather the employees in order to give them the chance to ask questions,”*¹⁷² one respondent explained and this argument was shared by several other respondents as well. *“We consider the managers within the company to be the primarily channel in crisis situations. They can call for a meeting very fast and they can explain what is going on. (Crisis) are often very complicated,”*¹⁷³ another respondent explained. Another argument for using face to face meetings were also found in the interviews, focusing on the avoidance of information dissemination. In one interview this view was described in the following way: *“In that situation (example of a crisis), only (channels of) face-to-face communication was chosen. And one person met all the employees regularly to explain what was going on (...) and no written communication was used, because we did not want to be quoted in media, and emails can be forwarded just because no one really knows what is going on and there are lots of questions.”*¹⁷⁴

The use of social media channels as a two-way communication channel for crisis management was also identified in the empirical material. The respondent explained it in the following way: *“When we knew we would be in that TV-program (the one that revealed the scandal), we started a blog. We did it because we realized there would be many upset opinions and we had to have a channel where these could be*

¹⁶⁸ Respondent 9

¹⁶⁹ Respondent 2

¹⁷⁰ Respondent 1, Respondent 2, Respondent 3, Respondent 4, Respondent 5, Respondent 6, Respondent 7, Respondent 8, Respondent 9, Respondent 10

¹⁷¹ Respondent 7

¹⁷² Respondent 4

¹⁷³ Respondent 8

¹⁷⁴ Respondent 3

expressed and a dialogue could take place. In one period the blog was very well-used. (...) The blog was open for everyone and I realized that journalists as well read it. In one period there were news about the crisis almost every day and I didn't have the time to write unique information for the employees, and therefore the employees used the blog as well. And it was very comfortable, I could just link from the intranet to the blog," the interviewee explained.

The view to combine channels for information and communication for crisis communication is also described by the respondents. The "channels for information" are explained to be used as support for the "channels for communication" by the respondents. *"We have three channels that are important for us in crisis management. First, the intranet where everyone receives the same information. Second, the letter that goes to all managers in the company, and third, meetings where all the managers get spoken information and later communicate with the employees they are responsible for. All three are necessary for the information to reach all employees of the company,"* was explained in one interview.

The different categories of communication channels are related to and corresponds two different models of J. Grunig and L. Grunig's public relation theory. To use the "channels for information" in crisis situations correspond the second model of public relation; *public information* in terms of being a one-way channel and being used for disseminating information. The authors describe this model as asymmetrical as there is an unbalance between the sender of information and the public/the receiver when for example posting a text on an intranet or sending an email¹⁷⁵. The second category; "channels for communication" mirrors J. Grunig and L. Grunig's *two-way symmetrical* model, as there is a dialogue between the sender and the receiver, regardless if the dialogue takes place on a staff meeting or in social media. The two-way model is about creating an understanding between the sender and the public, in order to both understand the public's needs as for the public to understand the companies' actions and the mindset of the authorities in the organization¹⁷⁶. The similarity between the *public information* model and the *two-way symmetrical* model is the objective to inform the public rather than fooling them, a dimension Grunig and Grunig developed out of Eric Goldman's work¹⁷⁷.

¹⁷⁵ Grunig, L., Grunig J. E., Dozier, D. M. 2002:306-310 & Grunig, J., Grunig L., 2006:10-11

¹⁷⁶ Ibid

¹⁷⁷ Grunig, J. E. 1992:286-290

5.4 Is internal crisis communication a variation of external crisis communication?

Interviewing Communication Managers about communicating with employees in crisis situations has resulted in several findings about their strategies in responding to crisis, when to communicate with the employees (and when not to) and also how the information is communicated in forms of communication channels. The findings show a similarity or even equivalence with external crisis communication. For example, the information shared in crisis should according to all respondents be the same for external publics and internal publics. And the mix of communication channels for spreading information and having a dialogue to create an understanding, is after all also very similar to the use of a press release in combination with a press conference, which could be seen as a traditional way of sharing external crisis communication. Therefore, it is possible to question if internal crisis communication actually is a variation of external crisis communication, with the only exception that the receivers are two different publics, external or internal?

To some extent internal crisis communication and external crisis communication can be argued to be quite similar. Using a crisis of an external accident as an example, the most given scenario based on the respondents answers would be as follows: The happening occur and the company put out a press release and a intranet post out, with the same information about what happened. Then, there is almost no difference between the internal and external crisis communication, it is done professionally, strategically and almost systematically. But the findings of this study also show that in some cases, what to communicate and when it should be done, are no simple decisions as reporting what happened in an accident, but instead very complicated, less strategic and more emotion-based.

The respondents describe crisis that includes employees and crisis which proportion is unclear as situations where internal crisis communication differs from, and therefore cannot be considered as a variation of, external crisis communication. And the difference lies in the strategies for such situations, as these were unclear, nonexistent or contradictive in comparison with the other crisis communication strategies described during the interviews. This result indicates a problematic balance between supporting and accommodating the employees and an uncertainty about when you should and should not inform the employees about the crisis. *"You need to trust your guts,"*¹⁷⁸ is a citation from one of the respondents, explaining the (nonexistent) strategy for such crisis.

¹⁷⁸ Respondent 6, Respondent 8

Several aspects were explained to be taken into account when communicating with employees in crisis involving employees or those of unclear proportion: The communication shared should; not worry the workers, obstruct the spreading of rumors, not judge any employee, consider the employees' right to know and also accommodate the fact that people personally handle crisis in different ways. What is interesting is that these aspects could in fact be applied on an external public as well since you don't want to worry people with your information, not spread rumors, not judge anyone etc. But with external publics it might be easier to collectivize the audience and base the crisis communication decisions on professionalism and organizational strategies, whereas internal publics are harder to distance yourself from and the decisions of communication therefore becomes less professional and to a greater proportion based on personal judgment. It might seem reasonable, but somehow it is also a paradox between the strategic, logical perspective that is found in crisis communication literature and the non-strategic, more emotional way of responding in these specific crisis situations. Also, there is somehow a divergence between; agreeing crises are preventable, that internal crisis communication is important, and in the requirement to have some kind of routine or strategy of what to do in crisis situations, like the respondents do; and later to trust a "gut feeling" if they are actually facing a crisis.

5.5 Summary of Result & Discussion

Among the respondents of the municipally owned companies in this study, there is no unequivocally answer regarding what a crisis really is and consist of. Different viewpoints of seeing it as effects or experiences, preventable in different ways and stoppable, not stoppable or sometimes stoppable are identified in the interviews and it is not possible to find any pattern with regards to the different characteristics of the respondents. The different viewpoints can however be related to different crisis definitions as well as the different process perspectives described in the theoretical framework of this thesis. The fact that the descriptions and explanations of crises differs means it is hard to find any specific situation when internal crisis communication actually is practiced, apart from the fact that it is used in (the quite vague concept of) crisis situation.

The results also show that it is important to communicate a message that signals control and openness in crisis situations. An embracing perspective of handling crises are expressed in the interviews and can be related to the crisis communication theories used for this study. A unity among the interviewees is also expressed when it comes to the content of information in crisis

communication, as they all argued that the same information should be shared internally and externally in crisis situation, in order to make sure no one knows more or less. However, when going deeper into the issue, the opinions to strive for equal treatment of different publics in crisis communication differs, and two different situations when crisis communication should be practiced differently to different publics were identified. These situations are: when the crisis is regarding individuals (an employee is involved in the crisis) and when the proportion of the crisis is unclear (when no one knows if it will evolve or disappear). In these situations the results show that factors to not judge and stand up for the employees and not to worry employees by sharing unnecessary information constitute a balance that in crisis situations is handled by personal judgments and not by specific strategies.

When practicing internal crisis communication, the organization concerned in this study uses both communication channels for one-way information and two-way communication. Some respondents expressed the two different types of channels to complement one another whereas others preferred having a dialogue rather than monologue with the employees in crisis situations. The use and combination of communication channels used for internal crisis communication, is very similar to the traditional communication channels of press releases and press conferences used for external communication. In this way, internal crisis communication can be seen as a variation of external crisis communication where the only difference being the public and receivers of information. Yet, other factors indicate that internal crisis communication is differentiated external crisis communication.

6. CONCLUDING REMARKS

In this final section of the thesis, concluding remarks regarding the research question of this study will be described. Since this thesis is a case study of qualitative character and in a limited period of time, the remarks should be seen as indications of what internal crisis communication implies, and require further examination in academic research.

6.1 What are the practical implications of internal crisis communication?

Internal crisis communication, defined in this thesis as the communication between managers and employees in crisis situations, is viewed to be an important part of crisis management since it aims to promote employees' commitment to the organization and awareness of a changing environment that crisis often includes. However, different views of what a crisis really is, if it is preventable and/or stoppable, make it impossible to identify any obvious situations when internal crisis communication should or should not be exercised. Also, different opinions regarding if crisis situations require specific crisis strategies, which means internal crisis communication strategies sometimes can be equivalent with the regular internal communication strategies, in some organizations.

Focusing on the content of information and method used for communicating it, internal crisis communication can be seen as a variation of external crisis communication. This since the content and amount of the information spread is the same for the two, with the only exception of using different audiences as receivers of the messages. The tactics of how to respond to the crisis is thereby also the same for both internal and external communication, and the use of a combination of informative and communicative channels in internal crisis communication could be seen as very similar to the strategies in external crisis communication.

But internal crisis communication also includes factors that differentiate it from external crisis communication, and are making it difficult for companies to have and use clear strategies for what they should communicate to their employees in crisis situations. These factors are all related to the employees and include: not worrying the workers, obstruct the spreading of rumors, not judging employees, the employees' right to know and also the fact that people handle crisis differently. Internal crisis communication therefore implies a balance between having a good dialogue with the employees and accommodating the needs of the employees.

6.2 What are the theoretical implications of internal crisis communication?

The concept of crisis communication involves how a company chooses to or should communicate in crisis situations, in order to make the process of the crisis to resolve faster and minimize the damage of its effects. According to the literature, there are different communication strategies to choose from/use in crisis situations dependent on the crisis, as well as the organization need to be prepared and have routines for such situations. The findings of this study, focusing on the internal crisis communication strategies, corresponds the need for different strategies regarding communication with the employees, in different crisis situations. However, the strategies for internal crisis communication are related to personal judgment rather than organizational structure, and it implies personal communication rather than the systematical communication used for external crisis communication. The title of this paper; “You need to trust your guts,” illustrates the paradox identified between the need for crisis communication strategies in crisis situation, and the ambivalence to have a good personal judgment and a “gut feeling” when it comes to crisis communicating with the functional public of the employees.

6.3 Recommendations for future studies

Since this study is a case study of the municipally owned companies in Gothenburg, no generalizations of organizations, contexts or time can be made. Future research should therefore focus on comparing the internal crisis communication strategies of different organizations in different times and contexts, in order to examine if the conclusions of this study are supported or opposed in other municipalities or other types of companies. Also, this study takes a strategic and managerial approach of internal crisis communication; discussing the strategies the managers explain the company to have. An approach for future studies could instead be to take the employee approach, examining which internal crisis communication strategies different workplace exercise and how employees want to be treated and communicated to in crises situations, all to increase the knowledge of internal crisis communication.

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APPENDIX

Appendix 1 – Detailed information about the interviewees

Alias	Gender	Education	Experience	Number of employees within the company	Crisis experience
Respondent 1	Female	Courses through the company	< 10 years	60	Yes
Respondent 2	Female	Higher education in Communication*	10 – 20 years	1300	Yes
Respondent 3	Female	Higher education in Communication*	20 – 30 years	20	Yes
Respondent 4	Female	Higher education in Communication*	< 10 years	60	Yes
Respondent 5	Male	Higher education in Journalism	10 – 20 years	10	No
Respondent 6	Male	Higher education in Journalism	20 – 30 years	90	No
Respondent 7	Female	Higher education in Public Administration	20 – 30 years	250	Yes
Respondent 8	Female	Higher education in Communication*	20 – 30 years	260	Yes
Respondent 9	Male	Higher education in Communication*	20 – 30 years	880	Yes

* The subject of Communication includes courses and educational programs of media science, public relations and other related areas.

Respondent 10	Female	Higher education in Behavioral Science & Business Administration	20 – 30 years	120	Yes
Respondent 11	Female	Higher education in Business Administration	20 – 30 years	10	No

Appendix 2 – The interview guide

Interview guide ^{**}

Before each interview the respondent is told about his/her anonymity in the study. Also, the fact that I as the researcher have no intention to discuss specific crisis is shared, but also explain that examples can be used.

THEME 1 – INTRODUCING QUESTIONS

- How long have you work for this organization?
- What is your role within the organization?
- Have you had any similar responsibility/role before, in other companies?
- What kind of education do you have?

THEME 2 – WHAT IS A CRISIS?

- What is a crisis to you and your organization?
- Have your organization been through a crisis?
- Do you think a crisis is preventable?
- Do you prevent yourself for crisis?
- Do you consider a crisis to be stoppable, or does it have its own course?
- Are there different types of crisis?

THEME 3– CRISIS MANAGEMENT/CRISIS COMMUNICATION

- What kinds of strategies do you have for managing a crisis in your organization?
- What is important to you/your company to communicate in a crisis situation?
- Which communication channels do you use for crisis communication? Are these different from your "regular" communication channels?
- In a crisis situation, what do you communicate? To whom do you communicate? Do you communicate anything with your employees?
- Do you use different strategies for different crisis?

^{**} This is a translation of the interview guide, originally made in Swedish

- Which communication channel do you use for communicating with your employees? Is there any way the employees can give feedback through this channel?
- Are there any situation, when you choose not to communicate with your employees?
- Is there any kind of crisis plan that you use in crisis situations? What does the plan include? Do specific persons have specific responsibilities in different situations?
- In a crisis, there is a risk of media reporting about it, what do you think about that? Do you inform your employees if interviews have been done or comment on articles?

Appendix 3 – Analytical instrument

For conducting the analysis, the interviews were summarized in charts in order to be able to compare the answers and identify the categories in the material. The first part of this chart is found on the following page, illustrating the grounded theory technique used for analyzing the empirical material. The chart is scanned and not fully readable, but illustrates how the categories were identified in the material, by the use of different colors and notes.

Del 1 - Vad är en kris?

Var är en kris?	Intervju 1	Intervju 2	Intervju 3	Intervju 4	Intervju 5	Intervju 6	Intervju 7	Intervju 8	Intervju 9	Intervju 10	Intervju 11
Yar är en kris?	När något övervak & plöjligt händer som påverkar bolaget	Andra svar: För de som kollar som olyckor. Nu även personliga händelser som sjukvård, bränder, med betydelse som som händelser på något vis.	För typisk kris är när man blir undslagen för att man tror na göra ett saker. Arbetsansvar till lagrar och om. Efter att ett kris börjar mer.	Har definierat i handboken som re handboken i den utgåvanen och som utgör ett risk för verksamheten. Och som kriser som påverkar och uttrycks.	Det är någon som händer på verksamheten något som skapar ett förändring i den verksamheten eller bilden av företaget.	För kris kan vara något som händer som påverkar verksamheten och som utgör ett risk för verksamheten. Och som kriser som påverkar och uttrycks.	Det handlar om risker för till exempel utvecklingen för till exempel. Men finns det också risker för verksamheten? Kommer det vara något som påverkar verksamheten och som utgör ett risk för verksamheten. Och som kriser som påverkar och uttrycks.	Betalning, överenskommande och skadestånd. För att kunna lösa upp situationen och återgå till en normal verksamhet. Kommer det vara något som påverkar verksamheten och som utgör ett risk för verksamheten. Och som kriser som påverkar och uttrycks.	Det finns två typer av kriser som är en kris som händer på ett sätt som påverkar verksamheten och som utgör ett risk för verksamheten. Och som kriser som påverkar och uttrycks.	Praktiskt och kriser som händer på ett sätt som påverkar verksamheten och som utgör ett risk för verksamheten. Och som kriser som påverkar och uttrycks.	Kriser är alla de situationer eller händelser som påverkar verksamheten och som utgör ett risk för verksamheten. Och som kriser som påverkar och uttrycks.
Kan man förebygga kriser? Har man förberett sig för kriser?	Detta kan man inte förutse. Men man kan vara beredd på att göra det.	Ja, vilket till följd av att det gäller att vara beredd på att göra det.	Ja till viss del. Men man kan inte förutse alla kriser. Men man kan vara beredd på att göra det.	Självklart. Men man kan inte förutse alla kriser. Men man kan vara beredd på att göra det.	Man kan förebygga kriser genom att vara beredd på att göra det.	Man kan förebygga kriser genom att vara beredd på att göra det.	Ja, man kan förebygga kriser genom att vara beredd på att göra det.	Man kan förebygga kriser genom att vara beredd på att göra det.	Man kan förebygga kriser genom att vara beredd på att göra det.	Man kan förebygga kriser genom att vara beredd på att göra det.	Man kan förebygga kriser genom att vara beredd på att göra det.
Olina typer av kriser...	Personaltvister, inre konflikter, negativa media, olyckor, personliga händelser, etc.	Olyckor, personaltvister, inre konflikter, etc.	Olyckor, personaltvister, inre konflikter, etc.	Olyckor, personaltvister, inre konflikter, etc.	Olyckor, personaltvister, inre konflikter, etc.	Olyckor, personaltvister, inre konflikter, etc.	Olyckor, personaltvister, inre konflikter, etc.	Olyckor, personaltvister, inre konflikter, etc.	Olyckor, personaltvister, inre konflikter, etc.	Olyckor, personaltvister, inre konflikter, etc.	Olyckor, personaltvister, inre konflikter, etc.
Kan man dela en kris?	Kan dela en kris om man har goda relationer och kommunikation.	Kan man dela en kris om man har goda relationer och kommunikation.	Kan man dela en kris om man har goda relationer och kommunikation.	Kan man dela en kris om man har goda relationer och kommunikation.	Kan man dela en kris om man har goda relationer och kommunikation.	Kan man dela en kris om man har goda relationer och kommunikation.	Kan man dela en kris om man har goda relationer och kommunikation.	Kan man dela en kris om man har goda relationer och kommunikation.	Kan man dela en kris om man har goda relationer och kommunikation.	Kan man dela en kris om man har goda relationer och kommunikation.	Kan man dela en kris om man har goda relationer och kommunikation.
Övrig kommentar gällande beskrivning av kriser. Ex. Koppling till teorier	Man får inte säga att det är en kris om man inte har goda relationer och kommunikation.	Man får inte säga att det är en kris om man inte har goda relationer och kommunikation.	Man får inte säga att det är en kris om man inte har goda relationer och kommunikation.	Man får inte säga att det är en kris om man inte har goda relationer och kommunikation.	Man får inte säga att det är en kris om man inte har goda relationer och kommunikation.	Man får inte säga att det är en kris om man inte har goda relationer och kommunikation.	Man får inte säga att det är en kris om man inte har goda relationer och kommunikation.	Man får inte säga att det är en kris om man inte har goda relationer och kommunikation.	Man får inte säga att det är en kris om man inte har goda relationer och kommunikation.	Man får inte säga att det är en kris om man inte har goda relationer och kommunikation.	Man får inte säga att det är en kris om man inte har goda relationer och kommunikation.

* Quote finns i Koppling litteraturen

Kolla upp vad som står på sidan 10 i boken om det är en kris eller inte. Vad är en kris? Vad är en kris? Vad är en kris? Vad är en kris?