technical experts who might have served as buffers between
for example, are often distracted or inaccessible during a cris
to records, personnel, decision systems and support structure
limited. During the BP/Deepwater Horizon oil spill, for exam
sions had to be made about how to control the leaking well a
the oil's impact without precise information regarding the da
one knew how the various well components might respond a
understood how the use of very large quantities of chemical d
would impact the ecosystem.

Time compression is also associated with the intense media
that follows a crisis. News is inherently a time-sensitive pr
the news media generally cover crisis events and do so as cl
time as possible (Greenberg and Gantz, 1993). The prolife
24-hour news services and news magazines has created an inte
for 24/7 news coverage. Journalists, in fulfilling their social
function, actively seek stories of defective and unsafe prod
corporate wrongdoing, adding an additional layer of crisis
threat. Moreover, the media often seek immediate explanation
ing cause and blame and disseminate this information very bro
harm created by a crisis, including victims' stories, is often dra
represented in the press. During a crisis, this pressure for i
explanations about cause and consequences, and the very bro
dissemination of those messages, further compresses time and
fies the consequences of decisions and public statements m
organizations.

As discussed earlier, developmental approaches to crises ha
popular for many years and are some of the most ubiquitous
of crises and disasters. The four models described here – the thr
model, Fink's four-stage model, Turner's theory of failure in f
and the Crisis and Emergency Risk Communication model – are
the most useful for describing communication phenomena.

Three-Stage Model

Three-stage models of crisis development has been employed by
crisis communication scholars (Coombs, 2012; Ray, 1999;
Sellnow and Ulmer, 2001). This approach is generally used to
and examine specific stage-related features of crisis and link t
particular communication exigencies and strategies.

The three-phase model of pre-crisis, crisis and post-crisis has been adopted widely by organizational crisis theorists and communication scholars and is probably the most widely used framework, in part due to its simplicity.

During pre-crisis, an emerging threat of pre-critical uncertainty develops and interacts with other aspects of a system. This process is typically described as an incubation or gestation process where the magnitude of a threat grows and creates dynamic non-linear interactions. Often, this incubation involves a risk judged by managers as minor interacting in a non-linear and disproportional way with other factors. In some cases, threats converge or connect and interact with other deficiencies or fallacious assumptions about risk. Another common interaction concerns the level of threat preparation interacting with other system needs (Seeger, Sellnow and Ulmer, 1998). In the case of the BP/Deepwater Horizon oil spill, the resources available to respond to the threat were entirely inadequate, given the amount of oil involved. This was in part due to the fact that neither oil executives nor regulatory agencies believed a spill of that magnitude was possible.

The crisis stage, as discussed earlier, begins with the trigger event and a general recognition that a crisis has indeed occurred. The trigger event is usually but not always some dramatic, sudden occurrence that signals a severe disruption of the system and onset of harm or the potential for harm. Fires, explosions, floods and transportation accidents generally fit into this category. In other cases, the trigger event may be much more subtle and involve a slow realization that a crisis is developing as information is accumulated and interpreted. Disease outbreaks from contaminated food, for example, usually require a pre-crisis period of assessment and analysis as people present themselves to health care providers and the information is reported to public health officials.

The recognition that a crisis has occurred is often accompanied by extreme emotional arousal, stress, fear, anger, shock, general disbelief and sometimes denial. Panic in the form of extreme maladaptive responses, although a feature of some situations, is relatively rare (Tierney, 2003). More often, it is the overwhelming confusion about what is happening that disrupts the basic capacity to understand. The crisis stage is where harm is initiated and where a majority of the direct damage occurs. Harm may take many forms and may extend beyond the boundaries of the immediate scene. In other cases, the harm may be more limited. Mitigation activity, containment and damage limitation during the crisis stage by crisis responders, managers and participants may significantly reduce the harm.

The crisis stage, then, is typically a moment of great emotional turmoil, drama and confusion. Moreover, the structures and devices necessary to make sense of the situation often collapse at the very moment they are necessary to help reconstitute order and mount a response. Slowly, however, through self-organizing processes and individual choices and actions, basic sensemaking processes and responses emerge.

The final stage, post-crisis, begins when the harm, drama, confusion and uncertainty of the crisis dissipate and some sense of order is re-established. It is generally accompanied by both a sense of relief and a recognition of the loss that has occurred. It is also a time of intense investigation and analysis that includes efforts to create plausible explanations of what went wrong; why, how, who is to blame; and what should be done to prevent future crises. Fundamentally these processes are efforts to make sense of the crisis by looking retrospectively at what happened and constructing and testing plausible interpretations (Weick, 1979). Often investigations are undertaken by external agencies, regulatory bodies and sometimes the courts. Much of the post-crisis determination of blame and responsibility involves elaborate arguments, strategies and accounts of explanation, excuses and apologies. These strategies, described more fully in Chapter 7, are grounded in the assumption that "restoring or protecting one's reputation" is a primary goal (Benoit, 1995, p. 71).

Applications of the Three-Stage Model

The three-stage model has been very influential as a basic conceptual framework for crisis analysis. Like other stage or phase models, it has been used in case studies as a way of structuring the analysis of a specific crisis or classes of crises. Ray (1999), for example, used this framework to examine three airline disasters. She was able to demonstrate how the disasters developed over time and to identify common elements of airline disasters as a crisis type. The pre-crisis, crisis, post-crisis framework has also been adopted by the professional community in public relations as a basic conceptual framework for understanding crises and developing strategies for management (Coombs, 2007). Others have suggested that these three phases can be understood simply as prevention, response and recovery (Hale, Dulek and Hale, 2005). This representation is a natural way to describe the development of a crisis. One of the useful features of this model is that it tracks how those experiencing the crisis characterize its evolution. Thus, residents of

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Strengths and Weaknesses of the Three-Stage Model

The three-stage model of crisis is advantageous in its simplicity. It captures many of the broad and basic structures of the events and provides sufficient detail to allow decision makers and managers some sense of what to expect as an event unfolds. Its simplicity also allows for application to many crisis contexts. The model, however, lacks precision in its predications and says little about the relationship between stages and how they merge, or about the larger processes associated with the stages. The stages are only characterized in very broad and general terms and the model does not capture the specific nuances of an event. Jacques (2007) has critiqued the model, as well as other phase approaches, as overly linear and failing to capture the dynamic nature of these events. Nonetheless, the three-phase model has been widely adopted by scholars using case study approaches and by the practitioner community.

Fink's Four-Stage Cycle

Steven Fink's work in crisis management helped popularize the stage approach. Fink was among the first to borrow from medical terminology to describe a crisis as a kind of chronic disease or affliction that develops over time. In many ways, his framework constitutes an extended metaphor. This is a common approach to theory development, allowing attention to be focused on a particular phenomenon by comparing it to a related concept or process. In Fink's conceptualization, a crisis is like a disease. Developed against the backdrop of Three Mile Island, where he served as a crisis management consultant to the Pennsylvania governor, his work is informed by one of the most important disasters of that time.

Three Mile Island, in Dauphin County, Pennsylvania, close to Harrisburg, is an electricity-generating nuclear plant. An accident there on March 28, 1979 involved a malfunctioning valve in a secondary cooling system. The complexity of the crisis, including the unanticipated interaction of several systems and the inability of operators to determine exactly what was happening, created the potential for significant harm. Failure to provide appropriate levels of coolant meant that some of the